

# ACCESS-BASED CONSUMPTION OF CLOTHES: OWNERSHIP, ATTACHMENT, AND IDENTITY

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## Abstract

Whereas ownership has traditionally been central to consumption, consuming objects by accessing them rather than owning is becoming an increasingly attractive alternative for consumers. Access-based consumption is seen to liberate consumers from the obligations of ownership and allow them to experience something they normally could not. The purpose of this study is to explore the phenomena of access-based consumption and gain understanding on the nature of ownership in access-based consumption and its relation to consumers' identity work. The study is conducted in highly visible and highly symbolic consumption context of clothing, which is assumed to enrich our understanding on the phenomena. The study relies on the consumer research literature of construction-through-consumption and liquid consumption.

The study is qualitative and interpretive in nature, relying on semi-structured in-depth interviews of seven clothing library users as the main data collection method. Materiality is added as an additional layer to the study through relying on the method of wardrobe interviews. Wardrobe interviews are employed in order to better understand the person-object relationships.

The study deepens our understanding on how objects within the realm of access-based consumption are employed in consumers' identity narratives and what kind of interplay they have with the objects belonging to one's own wardrobe. By building on the literature of construction-through-consumption, this study suggests that access-based consumption may provide consumers with unique opportunities for identity expression, identity experimentation, and reaching for desirable identities that are out of consumers reach in traditional ownership. Ownership is found to be an important source for constructing coherent identities.

This study adds on our understanding of the nature of ownership in access-based consumption as it illustrates how consumers may form attachment with access-based goods and how they aim to control it. Lastly, this study expands our understanding on managing wardrobe as a clothing collection by illustrating the interplay of liquid, access-based clothes with the solid core of clothes collection, and by suggesting how liquid consumption may help consumers in managing coherent wardrobes.

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**Keywords** access-based consumption, collaborative consumption, consumer culture, identity, ownership, clothing library

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## Tiivistelmä

Vaikka omistaminen on perinteisesti ollut keskeistä kulutuksessa, jakamiseen perustuva kulutus on kasvattamassa suosiotaan kuluttajien keskuudessa vaihtoehtoisena kulutusmuotona omistamiselle. Jakamiseen perustuvan kulutuksen on havaittu vapauttavan kuluttajan omistukseen liittyvistä velvoitteista sekä mahdollistavan kuluttajan kokea jotain, mitä hän ei normaalisti voisi. Tämän tutkimuksen tavoitteena on tutkia jakamiseen perustuvaa kulutusta ja syventää ymmärrystä siinä esiintyvän omistamisen luonteesta sekä sen suhteesta kuluttajien identiteettityöhön. Tutkimuksen kontekstina toimii muoti. Kontekstivalinnan uskotaan rikastuttavan ymmärrystämme ilmiöstä, koska muoti on erittäin näkyvä ja vahvasti symbolinen kulutuskonteksti.

Tutkimus on luonteeltaan kvalitatiivinen ja interpretivistinen, ja sen pääasiallisena tutkimusmenetelmänä toimii seitsemälle vaatelainaamon käyttäjälle toteutetut puolistrukturoidut syvähaastattelut. Tutkimuksessa hyödynnettiin lisäksi vaatekaappihaastattelun menetelmää, joka lisäsi tutkimukseen materiaalisen ulottuvuuden ja mahdollisti ymmärtämään paremmin kuluttajan ja tuotteen välisiä suhteita.

Tutkimus syventää ymmärrystämme siitä, miten kuluttajat hyödyntävät jakamisen kautta kuluttamiaan kulutustavaroita identiteettinarratiiviansa rakennuksessa ja millaisessa vuorovaikutuksessa nämä kulutustavarat ovat kuluttajan omien vaatteiden kanssa. Tukeutuen vahvasti aiempaan tutkimukseen identiteetin rakentamisesta kulutuksen kautta tutkimus osoittaa, että jakamiseen perustuva kulutus tarjoaa uudenlaisia mahdollisuuksia identiteetin ilmaisuun, identiteettikokeiluihin ja ihanteellisten identiteettien tavoitteluun, jotka eivät olisi samalla tavoin saavutettavissa omistukseen perustuvan kulutuksen kautta. Tutkimus osoittaa, että omistus on yhä keskeisessä osassa jatkuvan identiteetin rakennuksessa.

Tutkimus lisää ymmärrystämme omistuksen luonteesta jakamiseen perustuvassa kulutuksessa osoittamalla, miten kuluttajat voivat kiintyä jakamisen kautta kuluttamiinsa tuotteisiin ja millä tavoin he pyrkivät kontrolloimaan tätä kiintymystä. Lopuksi, tutkimus syventää ymmärrystämme siitä, millaisia tapoja liittyy vaatekaapin ylläpitämiseen kokoelmana kuvailemalla sitä, miten jakamisen kautta kulutetut vaatteet ovat vuorovaikutuksessa omistetun vaatekokoelman kanssa sekä sitä, miten vaatteiden kuluttaminen jakamalla voi helpottaa vaatekaapin ylläpitoa kokoelmana.

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**Avainsanat** jakamistalous, kuluttajakulttuuri, identiteetti, omistaminen, vaatelainaamo

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Ownership has traditionally been central to consumption. It has been argued that that our possessions define who we are: we are what we own (Belk 1988). As today's society lacks structures determining identity, it has been argued to be merely based on consumption (Holt, 2002; Bauman, 2007). Clothes as possession are argued to have especially strong symbolic meaning to their owners because they are important tools in constructing and communicating one's identity (Woodruffe-Burton, 1998). The collection of clothes, the wardrobe, can be perceived as an identity bank of the consumer (Cwerner, 2001) that ensures continuity to identity by connecting past, present, and future selves (Guy and Banim, 2000). However, wardrobes are not only filled by clothes actively used but also clothes that shall be thrown away in the future (Cwerner, 2001). Overconsumption and throwaway culture are seen as reasons behind some of the major environmental concerns (Piscicelli et al., 2015), and consumers themselves are increasingly interested in finding more conscious ways to consume clothing (Lundblad and Davies, 2016).

At the same time, collaborative consumption has been introduced as an attractive alternative form of consumption and it has started to grow its importance alongside the traditional concept of ownership in many industries. Sharing itself is an old concept but during past few years it has become a popular form of consumption (The Business Times, 2015). These alternative consumption forms are emerging alongside traditional ownership, and even challenging it (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012). One reason why collaborative consumption has begun to interest consumers seems to be the fact that consumers these days are more driven by experience and access to products and want to avoid the obligations of ownership (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012). Moreover, collaborative consumption has gained interest as it can be perceived as a more sustainable form of consumption compared to traditional ownership. Collaborative consumption has been found to appeal especially to consumers who are environmentally and ecologically conscious (Hamari et al., 2016). However, although consumption has been seen central to identity (Holt, 2002) the implications of the liquid forms of consumption on identity and its potential to linking value has not been researched yet (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017).

Collaborative consumption has been merely studied in industries such as cars and housing, but not that well in the context of clothing. Due to the distinctive features of fashion as highly symbolic and highly visible consumption context (Van der Laan and Velthuis, 2016), it seems to be important to study collaborative consumption in this context in order to expand our understanding on the phenomena. As clothes are central to identity construction (Woodruffe-Burton, 1998), the context of

clothing seems to be a highly interesting context to study what kind of implications liquid forms of consumption may have for identity. Moreover, even though collaborative consumption has been growing its importance as a new form of consumption during recent years, it has still not yet taken its role in mainstream fashion industry (Pedersen and Netter, 2015). There are few examples of successful businesses operating with collaborative consumption business models in the fashion industry such as Rent the Runway and Le Tote, but there has not been similar global successes such as in housing (Airbnb) or cars (Uber). Hence, it seems to be important to gain deeper understanding on the phenomena of collaborative consumption in this specific context.

Therefore, this research aims to explore the phenomena of access-based consumption of clothes. Due to the centrality of identity on consumption (Maguire and Stanway, 2008), the aim of this study is to gain understanding on the nature of the ownership in access-based consumption and its relation to the identity. Moreover, this study aims to create understanding on the relations of traditional ownership and liquid forms consumption in the context of clothing consumption by studying how consumers use the clothes they own, and the clothes they own only temporarily, as a part of their identity work. Furthermore, this study aims to grasp understanding on what is the nature of the ownership of these objects.

The research question is:

What are the implications of access-based consumption of clothes on ownership and identity?

## **2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

The literature has been focusing on how identity is constructed through possessions with symbolic meaning, and there are different insights on what these kind of possessions mean to consumers (e.g. Belk, 1988; Ahuvia, 2005; Mittal, 2006). However, there's little research on consumers' relations to temporary possessions, and how these are used in identity work. Hence, this research will look into the meaning of ownership of clothes today, when temporary forms of consumption are more present. This research is grounded in the studies of identity, ownership, and access-based consumption as a form of liquid consumption with respect to the context of clothing.

## **2.1 Identity and Construction through Consumption**

It has been stated that the late-modern society lacks certain structures such as class that determine identity, and this has made consumers' identities more fluid, on-going projects that are worked on in continuously changing circumstances (Van der Laan and Velthuis, 2016). Identity is predominantly seen as a narrative, a story line, that entails consumers past, present, and possible futures (Ahuvia, 2005). The constructed story is used in presenting oneself to others and for consumers themselves to make sense of self (Schembri et al., 2010). There's a common notion that the consumer can have multiple identities that form together some sense of who the person is (Reed et al., 2012). The identity narrative consists of integrated, but not necessarily unitary, selves (Arnould and Price, 2000). Fluidity is also central to the concept of identity narrative. Whereas certain identities are still relatively stable (e.g. nationality) some are more transitory and fluid (e.g. brand community, subculture) (Reed et al., 2012). As identity construction is based on accumulation of cultural, social, and symbolic capital that is presented in one's habitus (Seregina and Schouten, 2017), identities change over time when social and cultural factors they are build on change (Reed et al., 2012).

Identity is argued to be predominantly grounded in consumption (Holt, 2002) which is central to the paradigm of construction through consumption (Van der Laan and Velthuis, 2016). Consumption allows consumers to express their identities with flexibility, reflexivity, and creativity (Maguire and Stanway, 2008) as identities are no longer tied to certain structures in society (Van der Laan and Velthuis, 2016). The meaning attached to consumption goods is transferred to individuals' lives through consumption rituals (McCracken, 1986), and communicated to others through the signs and symbols embedded in consumption objects visible to others (Schembri et al. 2010). The social aspect seems to be strongly emphasized in construction of identity through consumption, as consumers aim to define themselves in relationship to other people (Ahuvia, 2005; Berger and Heath, 2007), and reach out for aspirational reference groups (Maguire and Stanway, 2008). Symbol-rich objects entail shared meanings but also allow for consumers to make their own interpretations of the signs (Woodruffe-Burton, 1997). Central to identity construction is also the need of distinctiveness (Maguire and Stanway, 2008). Consumers reach out for their true selves through authenticating acts that foster individuality and differentiation (Arnould and Price, 2000).

Research has found several difficulties that consumers seem to face today in identity construction. Identity construction seems to be highly problematic today due to a changing environment and growing requirements towards consumers (Van der Laan and Velthuis, 2016). There is wide selection

available for consumers to choose who they want to be and what kind of lives they want to lead (Ahuvia, 2005). Consumers can and do possess multiple identities (Reed et al. 2012), however, the difficulty that consumers face when having multiple identities in a constantly changing environment is to try maintain coherent sense of self (Ahuvia, 2005). Consumers are increasingly demanding towards brands as they require authenticity from the products utilized in on-going identity projects (Holt, 2002). Consumers are exposed to constantly expanding selection of choices, which also includes a risk that the choice goes wrong (Maguire and Stanway, 2008). Consumption can create an identity conflict where the harmony between the consumer's identities is disrupted (Reed et al., 2012). However, in this view consumption can similarly be a way for consumers to resolve certain identity conflicts (Reed et al., 2012). What remains unknown is how access-based consumption can be used in identity construction and identity management.

## **2.2 Clothing Consumption and Identity**

Clothing seems to have a strong position in construction-through-consumption phenomena (Van der Laan and Velthuis, 2016). This seems to be merely because of the highly symbolic nature of clothing and visibility to others (Van der Laan and Velthuis, 2016). Clothes are not only close to our body but also close to our sense of self (Niinimäki, 2010). Fashion possessions have been referred as codes that contain and deliver meanings (O'Cass, 2004), due to which clothing can be perceived as a vehicle of identity and hence it's seen to be central to consumers' identity work (Cwerner, 2001). Similarly, as in construction-through-consumption phenomena in general, meanings attached to clothing can be used in two ways in identity construction: to distinct oneself from others and to build affiliation with others (Thompson and Haytko, 1997). Clothes can be used to create positive self-images and to stand out while being true to self (Guy and Banim, 2000). However, clothing can also be used to blend in while still conveying an authentic image of oneself to others (Van der Laan and Velthuis, 2016). What is important in both of these strategies is the authenticating act: still being true to self and ensuring the right fit with the identity (Guy and Banim, 2000; Van der Laan and Velthuis, 2016).

Guy and Banim (2000) have further pointed out three different methods how consumers use their possessed clothing in their identity negotiation process: who they are, who they want to be, and who they are not. The first view 'who they are' contains consumers' everyday relation to clothing, and 'general' appearance they want to convey with their clothing choices (Guy and Banim, 2000). Important in this aspect is the way consumers try to effortlessly create accurate images of themselves



without too much effort by using their knowledge on how their clothes behave (Guy and Banim, 2000). Also Van der Laan and Velthuis (2016) has found that important goals for consumers in their clothing consumption are the quest to construct coherent self-images and aim to wear clothes that correspond well with their overall self-image. Although being true to themselves, still consumers try to present themselves in as favorable light as possible with their clothing choices (Banister and Hogg, 2004).

The second dimension: 'who they want to be' presents the idea that clothes act as a vehicle towards an aspirational self as consumers use clothes to enhance, or project, a positive self-image (Guy and Banim, 2000). Consumption objects are found not only to help express identity but also to assist in reaching desired selves (Ahuvia, 2005). Consumers seek affiliation with significant others and important reference groups by meeting their expectations through consumption of clothing (Banister and Hogg, 2004). Important in this view is that consumers think that they can achieve feeling about 'looking good' by correct choice of clothing and that they can imagine potential clothing that could create further positive self-projections (Guy and Banim, 2000). In this sense, consumers use the imageries created in the fashion world in order to reach their ideal future selves (Thompson and Haytko, 1997).

However, clothes consumption can also be seen as a negative act. The third dimension of clothes consumption 'who they are not' refers to way how clothes can at times fail to create desired look and end up reflecting a negative self-presentation (Guy and Banim, 2000). Consumers are willing to act consistently to their identities (Reed et al., 2012). Hence, through their consumption choices consumers try to avoid being identified with negative images (Banister and Hogg, 2004), and negotiate what kind of clothes to choose in order to not attract undesirable attention or be disqualified by others (Van der Laan and Velthuis, 2016). Banister and Hogg (2004) even found consumption activities that consumers use in order to avoid certain negative images to be more common than consumption with aspiration to reach certain positive images. Much of this seems to be related to the fear of failing to convey a true self-image and ending up creating false image by wearing clothing that's not coherent with self (Van der Laan and Velthuis, 2016) or clothing that could be interpreted negatively by others (Banister and Hogg, 2004).

## 2.3 The Concept of Ownership

Traditionally, ownership has been central to consumption, and the ultimate desire has been to own (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012). Possessions are important to consumers as they have an anchoring effect on identity (Belk, 1988), and they help consumers define who they are (O'Cass, 2004). The meaning embedded to consumption objects is transferred to individuals' lives through different rituals related to possessions including exchange, possession, grooming, and divestment (McCracken, 1986). Belk (1988) has further argued the centrality of possessions to consumers' identities with the notion that consumers regard certain possessions as part of themselves. This is argued to happen either unintentionally or intentionally (Belk, 1988). When possessions are regarded part of the self, they become incorporated in the extended self (Belk, 1988). However, the view of the core self and extended self where objects are incorporated has been questioned in later research. It has been proposed that not all possessions important to one's self concept become part of extended self (Mittal, 2006). This is because certain products can be purely instrumental in a way that they advance certain components of self-concept, but aren't still perhaps that important to the consumer and hence not used to define oneself (Mittal, 2006). Moreover, there is also literature that agrees on importance of high-involvement consumption to identity narratives, but disagrees in the idea that core versus extended self is the optimal way of describing the phenomenon (e.g. Ahuvia, 2005).

Possessions create continuity in consumers' identity negotiation process (Belk, 1988). Accumulation of possessions connect the past, present, and future selves, and hence define who we are, where we come from, and where we are going (Belk, 1988). Consumers can anchor certain identities via possessions, which creates feeling that the identities are stronger, and feeling of security (Belk, 1988). Consumers may also form attachment to objects they perceive as "their", and with whom they have long history with (Kleine and Baker, 2004). Possessions consumers are attached to are argued to be especially central to narrate one's life story by helping connecting with past relationships and anchoring identity to certain events or accomplishments relevant to the self (Kleine et al., 1995). Loved possessions also create continuity to the identity as they may help in transforming the identity to some desired form (Ahuvia, 2005). In addition, loved objects also seem to help consumers in resolving identity conflicts, and that way advance the quest for an identity narrative that is more coherent over time (Ahuvia, 2005).

Ownership has been found to be central in the context of clothing as well. Cwerner (2001) has discussed the importance of having a selection of vehicles of identity, clothes, to choose from in

consumers' daily self-presentation. Guy and Banim (2000) have found that for consumers it's essential to own pieces of clothing that can help in creating positive self-images. Central to ownership of clothing is knowing how to wear certain clothes (Woodward and Greasley, 2017). Being able to create positive self images through clothing is merely related to the past experience: consumers know how certain clothes 'behave', and can expect the kind of look they can create (Guy and Banim, 2000). Favorite clothes seem to bring ideal self closer (Guy and Banim, 2000).

## **2.4 Wardrobe and Collection of Clothes**

Collections have been argued to have more central part of one's self compared to isolated, individual items (Belk, 1988). Collecting is defined as long-term oriented accumulation, possession, and disposal which is characterized by selectivity and activity (Belk, 1991). Clothing can be seen as a personal everyday collection (Woodward and Greasley, 2017), and it has been further argued to be of the favorite collectible in today's society (Cwerner, 2001). Clothing collection includes the notions of relational configuration as the clothes in the collection need to aesthetically be combinable with each other and dynamicity as the tastes develop over time while still some preferences are ephemeral (Woodward and Greasley, 2017). Wardrobe as a storage for clothes stores also all the past and potential selves (Cwerner, 2001), and ensures continuity of identity as consumers integrate past, present, and future selves through the clothes they own (Guy and Banim, 2000). Hence, it can be seen that wardrobe encloses the whole personal biographies associated with them (Cwerner, 2001). Therefore, collection of clothes, wardrobe, can be important part of consumers' identity narrative construction either as an entity or through some special clothes it stores.

However, wardrobe does not only contain clothes that the consumer is satisfied with, or is actively wearing. As the nature of fashion is temporary and signs and symbols it entails are transient (Woodruffe-Burton, 1998), the wardrobe also stores clothes that consumers end up deciding to throw or give away (Cwerner, 2001). Guy and Banim (2000) found that consumers do own clothes they are dissatisfied with, because they fail to create desirable image. Possessions can lose their fit to self-image because consumers' own self-image may have changed, or because the image the possession carries may have changed (Belk, 1988). In the context of fashion, where the meanings constantly change (Woodruffe-Burton, 1998), this seems to be a relevant reason. Moreover, reason, that an item of clothing is irrelevant to the self can be because of failure in purchase situation. It has been found that consumers do experience feelings of having made mistakes on purchasing, or using specific items

of clothing (Guy and Banim, 2000). Rarely worn garments create feelings of guilt about one's consumption behavior, and take up space from the closet from potential purchases (Ha-Brookshire and Hodges, 2009). At the point when possession don't fit anymore ideal self-images, consumers should give them away (Belk, 1988). Moreover, disposal allows for consumption circle to continue, and certain disposal practices such as donation may help consumers avoid feeling guilty about their consumption behavior (Ha-Brookshire and Hodges, 2009).

Even though certain garments become irrelevant, they are not passed on easily. Traditional concept of ownership includes the concept of loss of object which has certain obligations for the owner and hence ownership can also be seen as a burden (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012). Bye and McKinney (2007) found that disposition of an old garment invested with meanings may be complex. Clothing that carries sentimental value is kept until the attachment fades away (Ha-Brookshire and Hodges, 2009). The reasons why consumers don't discard clothes they do not often wear include them reminding of past, and being closely tied to the identity (Guy and Banim, 2000). Consumers attach symbolic meaning for certain objects they own (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012), and the loss of an object that has been part of one's sense of self, might diminish identity and create negative feelings (Belk, 1988).

## **2.5 Collaborative Consumption**

The traditional concept of ownership has been challenged by alternative consumption forms that are based on access rather than ownership (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012). The broad term used for explaining this phenomenon is liquid consumption, in contrast to traditional solid consumption (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017). Liquid consumption is described as access based and dematerialized, and it consists of certain logic of consumption such as use, access, and immediacy (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017). Furthermore, the concept of liquid consumption is based on the idea of liquid modernity where everyday life has shifted to be more liquid and rapidly changing, which makes it more difficult for consumers build frames of reference for themselves (Bauman, 2007). Liquid consumption seems to challenge the importance of possessions and ownership, and it has implications to consumers' relation to objects due to temporal nature (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017). However, liquid consumption seems to still exist alongside traditional forms of consumption rather than replace them (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017).

Collaborative consumption is based on the concept of sharing, and it can be seen to be one phenomena under liquid consumption. Sharing has existed for a long time but the kind of sharing that is present in the market today is different. Whereas traditionally sharing has been more likely to take place within friends and family (Belk, 2014), today it takes place among networks and communities (Möhlmann, 2015). One important facilitator for new ways of sharing is the internet which enables sharing to happen on a larger scale than before (Belk, 2014). An important feature that divides collaborative consumption from pure sharing is that in collaborative consumption the access or use of products comes with a fee or compensation (Belk, 2014). Collaborative consumption includes sharing, lending, and renting that take place in organised platforms or systems and that can happen between consumers (C2C) or between business and the consumer (B2C) (Möhlmann, 2015).

There are several different terms for activities that belong to the same phenomena with collaborative consumption, such as access-based consumption in which consumers get access to goods and services through the market (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012) and commercial sharing systems (Belk, 2014). This study will be focusing on using the term access-based consumption. One important difference compared to the traditional concept of ownership is the temporary nature of access-based consumption (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012). In access-based consumption consumers get access to the object only for a limited time with fragment of its original costs after which they need to pass it on (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012). In this sense, collaborative consumption challenges the traditional consumer-object relationship which is more long-term in nature and requires higher monetary investment.

These access-based consumption forms have started to appeal to consumers, and there are several reasons for this. It has been found that utilitarian reasons and self-interest are main motivators for choosing the sharing-option (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012). Ownership may be seen as burdensome (Belk, 2007), and hence one motivation to consume access-based has been found to be to avoid risks related to ownership (Schaefer et al., 2016a). In liquid consumption consumers seem to avoid attaching personalization with an object which in turn makes the consumer less emotionally engaged with the object, and hence the object is easier to dispose (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017). Although earlier the access-based option was not celebrated by economically friendly consumers (Moeller and Wittkowski, 2010), it has been found that for some consumers it is a more sustainable alternative (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012; Hamari et al., 2016; Lawson et al., 2016). Indeed, collaborative consumption has been argued to potentially be one solution for sustainability issues in the fashion industry (Lang and Armstrong, 2018). Moreover, access-based consumption has been found to be

largely motivated by variety seeking (Chen, 2009; Moeller and Wittkowski, 2010; Lawson et al., 2016). Liquid consumption forms enable flexibility as consumers are able to minimize possessions (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017). In the context of clothing, access-based consumption has been found to be especially attractive for fashion leaders who are interested in fashion, and are positive towards fashion change (Lang and Armstrong, 2018).

Liquid forms of consumption shouldn't be viewed solely as positive development of consumption as they decrease the sources of security and stability (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017). As a trade-off for liquidity, consumers need to let go of the sense of control which normally comes when an object becomes part of extended self (Belk, 1988). Belk (2007) has also pointed out that the way consumers place importance on possessions and build their identities with possessions are great barriers to sharing. There may also be implications on attachment in liquid consumption. Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017) have suggested that the concept of attachment may become problematic in liquid consumption and as a result, consumers may attach themselves to fewer objects, and the nature of the attachment might be more fluid. However, Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017) argue that when relevance of the object to oneself is high, the consumption is likely to still be solid rather than liquid. Hence, it seems that consumers are not likely to let go of the sense of ownership of the possessions that are highly important to them. Moreover, those consumers who in general tend to place more emphasis on possessions are less likely to participate in sharing (Belk, 2007; Lawson et al., 2016; Lang and Armstrong, 2018).

## **2.6 Summary and Research Proposition**

As illustrated earlier, there has predominantly been a lot of literature arguing the importance of ownership, especially in the context of symbolic consumption such as clothing. Loved objects have been stated to help consumers in making sense of who they are and help in resolving identity conflicts (Ahuvia, 2005). It has been discussed how consumers construct images, and manage their identities with 'their' clothes by relying on their knowledge on how the clothes behave (Guy and Banim, 2000). Moreover, consumers' self-presentation is argued to be limited to the garments they have in their wardrobes and that in a constantly changing environment they need a collection of identity tokens they can use in daily self-presentation (Cwerner, 2001). However, in the emerge of collaborative consumption and alternative consumption modes the question is what are the implications on ownership and identity construction if there are no 'their' clothes anymore.

Belk (2014) has argued that due to new forms of consumption there has been a shift in the relationship between identity and ownership, and therefore the traditional view on ownership 'we are what we own' cannot be implied as that anymore. Also Bardhi and Eckhardt (2012) have proposed that the person-object relationship may be different in access-based consumption compared to what it is like in traditional ownership. According to them, access-based consumption enables consumers to more freely experiment lifestyles, and engage in flexible identity projects compared to traditional ownership (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012). Zamani et al. (2017) also discuss that lending clothing may enable consumers to even increase the speed of fashion, as they can update their wardrobe often. Similarly, Lang and Armstrong (2018) found that access-based provides fashion leaders value through enabling them to try out new fashions and discard old ones. Hence, access-based consumption seems to provide some tools for consumers to use in self-presentation.

However, in contrast to this, Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017) have questioned the possibility to maintain a stable identity in the context of liquid consumption and assumed the consumption still to be more solid when the relevance to the self is high. Moreover, Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017) have pointed out need for gaining understanding on the potential of liquid consumption in providing identity and linking value. Hence, what remains to be still under-researched and what this research aims to understand, is how consumers manage their identities with temporary ownership of clothes, and what is the relationship to ownership in the context of collaborative consumption of clothes. This research aims to gain understanding on those under researched areas by studying access-based consumption of clothes through the lens of construction-through-consumption.

### **3 METHODOLOGY**

The research studies the phenomena of access-based consumption in the context of clothing library by relying on the research tradition of Consumer Culture Theory (CCT). The research is qualitative in nature and it aims to understand the phenomena through the subjective life experiences of consumers in its socially constructed nature (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Next the context of the study is presented followed by introducing the research design, data collection methods, and data set and analysis.

### **3.1 Context of the Study: Clothing Library**

The interviewees of the study were customers of a clothing library in Finland. The library is founded in 2016, and it's a small business run by two employees. The business model of the clothing library is as follows: customers pay a subscription fee of either two months (80€), or six months (160€). They have the chance to take two items at a time that they can choose from the collection available in the physical shop. The customer can keep the loaned items from one to three weeks of time after which she has to return it to the shop. The physical shop is open only two times a week for a few hours so the time for visiting the service is limited. There is some flexibility in the general terms of use: an additional week, an additional item, and reservation cost extra, each around 10€. There is also a possibility to rent only once without having to become a member. One-time rental costs 50€. Customers also have a possibility to purchase clothes from the service. From time to time the collection is refreshed and at that time consumers have a chance to purchase certain pieces for discounted price.

There are several responsibilities for the members. Firstly, members have to wash the loaned clothes before returning them to the service, preferably with fragrance free detergent. Items that cannot be washed need to be taken care of differently before returning them. If an item of clothing gets damaged, the customer is responsible for reclaiming it. The items are inspected by the service person when customer returns them to the shop.

The clothes available in the service are mostly Finnish designers' clothes. Sustainability is in the core of the clothing library's brand and it is emphasized in the communication. Moreover, communal aspect is in the core of the brand as well as the service is communicated as "communal wardrobes". The brand communication is personal as the founding persons are bringing their personalities to the center of the communication.

### **3.2 Research Design**

The research is positioned in the research tradition of Consumer Culture Theory which focuses on exploring consumers, marketplaces, and the meanings created in their interplay (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). Consumer Culture Theory generally assumes the reality to be socially constructed and assumes individuals to be active agents in the creation of meanings (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). This research is further positioned in an interpretivist research paradigm which assumes that



realities are individually constructed. Interpretivist paradigm assumes that there are multiple realities formed within individual's minds when they make sense of the world (Hansen, 2004). Hence, it aims to understanding the phenomena through multiplicity of realities rather trying to make generalizations of one single reality and expose it to causality. Essential in an interpretivist research paradigm is the assumption that understanding of shared, and individually constructed realities can be acquired through social constructions such as language (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008). As one single truth is impossible to grasp in interpretivist paradigm the interpretation is based on hermeneutics which tries to grasp understanding through part-to-whole iteration (Thompson et al., 1989)

Furthermore, this research also relies on the philosophical assumption of existential-phenomenology which resembles interpretivism. Central in phenomenology is assuming that the world can be understood by one being in it, as experiences cannot be separated from their context (Thompson et al., 1989). Relying on interpretivist approach was seen to be suitable for this research as it aims to gain understanding in individual insights about the phenomena. Moreover, relying on phenomenological assumption of lived experiences is chosen as this research is especially interested in the spectrum of subjective meanings and personal life experiences that participants have around the phenomena.

### **3.3 Data Collection Methods**

An essential assumption to the interpretivist stance is that deeper understanding arises from the interaction and dialogue between the researcher and the participants (Ponterotto, 2005). Interpretative research therefore relies in methods based on language and shared meanings (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008). The methods of this research are chosen to be in line with the assumptions of the interpretivist paradigm and phenomenology. The data was collected by carrying out semi-structured face-to-face in-depth interviews.

*Interviewees.* The respondents were recruited through the clothing library's newsletter. The sample consisted of seven women living in Finland. The participants were all current or past members of the clothing library, except for one who had been considered clothes loaning as an option but not yet tried it. The choice to include both users and non current users was made in order to better understand what kind of experiences and meanings people who have different levels of involvement to clothes sharing service attach to the phenomena. Moreover, the interviewees' duration of membership varied from 2

months to 4,5 years which provided a wider perspective as the experiences of both novel and expert users were included in the interviews.

The selection criterion included gender: this research will only focus on women. The selection criterion was chosen in order to focus on only one gender as there may be differences in how men and women consume fashion (e.g. Van der Laan and Velthuis, 2016), and the aim of this research is not to focus on those potential differences in the context of collaborative consumption of clothes. Although age wasn't included in the selection criteria, all the participants belonged to the ages groups of young adults to adults with the age varying from 24 to 33. All of the participants lived in urban area of the capital city but they came from different backgrounds including both bigger and smaller cities. The sample size was not set in the beginning. Once data collection reached its saturation point, meaning when topics started to repeat themselves and not bring anything new, new interviews were no longer conducted.

*Interviews.* The loose structure of the interview was built upon the themes drawn from the preliminary understanding gained from the theory, and hence, more or less the same topics were covered in each interview. The themes covered in the interviews were: dressing up and foundations of own style, ownership of clothing, and experiences and meanings attached to access-based consumption of clothing. The questions were prepared based on the themes that arose in the literature review in order to mitigate the assumptions of the interviewer to take place too much (McCracken, 1988). Each interview started with a set of biographical questions in order for the researcher to better understand the background of the interviewee and in order to create more relaxed atmosphere.

The interviews were designed in such semi-structural format that it left plenty of room for the dialogue to take new directions over the course in cases when the interviewee brought up new topics. Hence, there was a slight variation between interviews in the topics covered. This was done in order to be open to novel issues that might arise around the phenomena, and help in getting an even deeper understanding in it. Moreover, probe questions were employed extensively in every opportunity where there seemed to be something more to be discovered as the follow-up questions are considered to be useful in providing with a way to gain deeper understanding on the interviewee (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008). According to McCracken (1988) preplanned prompt questions are especially relevant in case the phenomenon under study includes some self-explanatory elements. Hence, the interviewer prepared beforehand to prompt certain topics in case the interviewee wouldn't open up the topic as extensively as wished due to it being self-explanatory. However, each interview ended

up taking directions that were not preplanned and hence provided interesting information about interviewees' lived experiences.

All of the interviews except one were conducted in participants' homes which was assumed to give an even deeper understanding on the participants' individual experiences. More specific, this research applied method of wardrobe interviews. Wardrobe interviews include two layers: having an understanding of the wardrobe as space of storage (the size, maintenance, cleanliness), and as a collection of clothes (styles, brands, age of clothes) (Cwerner, 2001; Klepp and Bjerck, 2014). Wardrobe interviews were applied as a method in order to give a more comprehensive view on what kind of clothes participants own, what kind of meanings they attach to them, and how they are stored. This was ought to also give understanding on how these different aspects: the properties, the meanings attached, and the way stored and maintained, may vary between own and loaned clothes. Engaging with the material artifacts of the wardrobe was mostly done when discussing the second theme: ownership of clothing. One of the interviews also included a visit to the clothing library together with the interviewee in order to get a more comprehensive understanding on the experiences interviewees have in the clothing library. Originally the plan was to join few more participants in their visit to clothing library, however, after one interview conducted there, it became apparent that wardrobe interviews provide more opportunities in gaining deep understanding, and hence the rest of the interviews were carried out in participants' homes.

The interviews were conducted in a manner that included both formality and informality. This kind of balance is assumed to both support the interviewer's role as investigator and reassure the interviewee that the interviewer is sympathetic towards her personal experiences (McCracken, 1988). The interviewer tried to set an atmosphere where the interviewee could feel that she is the expert of the phenomena (Thompson et al., 1989).

### **3.4 Data Set and Analysis**

The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, and all the interviewees are presented with pseudonyms in this paper in order to secure anonymity. The data set consisted of seven interviews ranging in length between 50 minutes and 1 hour 25 minutes the average length being 66 minutes. Preparing the transcription acted as the first phase of familiarizing with the data. The transcriptions were then read through several times in order to make sense of the data and through that the

phenomena in question (see Moisander and Valtonen 2006). After several rounds of familiarizing with the data by reading transcriptions, the data was coded by using emergent coding. By using emergent coding, the aim was to find commonalities, repetitions, and original typologies in data and turn them into different codes (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008). However, in order to gain even richer understanding on each participant's subjective life experience, personal narrative memos were written of each interviewee. These narrative memos were constructed on the basis of emergent codes unique to each interview.

After having familiarized with the data through reading, emergent coding, and writing narrative memos, the data was then engaged in iterative process of going back and forth between the data and theory by interpreting, and recoding until developing framework. The emergent codes were then analyzed by reflecting them against the theory and in the end revised with priori codes drawn from the literature. Hence, central to the analyzing process was putting the data and theory in a dialogue in order to try to match them and through that gain novel understanding on the phenomena (see Moisander and Valtonen 2006). Finally, after several rounds between and draw themes from the codes that will then act as basis for the discussion.

## **4 FINDINGS**

Through the analysis three broad themes that reoccurred throughout the interviews were derived from the data. The three main themes are: 1) how consumers start embracing the liquid consumption as an opportunity to liberate themselves by scaling down their possessions, 2) how engaging in liquid consumption allow consumers to engage in identity experimentation while keeping own possessions in a minimum, and 3) how liquid consumption is problematized when consumers get attached to access-based goods. Whereas these three themes are individual entities in a sense that they explain the phenomena from different positions they do connect and have some overlap with each other in certain degree.

### **4.1 Embracing Liquid Consumption**

In most of the informants' narratives became apparent a change informants had experienced in their consumption values, that had also resulted in a change in their consumption habits. Many of the informants described in their accounts a time before engaging with access-based consumption as a time when their clothing consumption had been much more defined by aspiration to own plenty of

clothes and to indulge oneself with the consumption of changing desires. The transition that occurred thereafter was defined as a sort of self-realization that made the informants question their current consumption behavior, and engage in the practice of scaling down their wardrobe. The underlying motivations for scaling down the wardrobe included willingness to rationalize one's consumption, consuming more ethically, and liberating oneself from the burden of ownership. The practice of scaling down the wardrobe included two complementary subpractices: decluttering the wardrobe by letting go of the unnecessary, and restraining the temptation to buy new clothes.

#### 4.1.1 Decluttering the Wardrobe

As became apparent in many of the informants' accounts their consumption of clothes had predominantly been guided by such ideals as women need to have a lot of clothes but had then gradually started to be more based on new kinds of contrasting consumption ideals. These contrasting ideals encouraged rationalizing one's consumption behavior and engage in Marie Kondo type of decluttering methods to scale down one's possessions. These challenging consumption ideals provoked consumers to question their customary consumption habits as becomes apparent in Johanna's account:

*Johanna: It originally started when I did exchange studies for half a year in 2014, and until that it has actually been so that I have just bought everything, and like whatever just all kinds of clothes, and just bought whatever I feel like... And after that it felt like pointless to keep so much stuff. But actually the final [idea] for that has come two years after that when I was abroad again for half a year and then I had to really pack my flat to a warehouse... And then I came back and I started to unpack those clothes... And then I thought like is this what I've stored now or like why do I have so much of it. I don't need this. And after that I've like really intentionally decluttered it to a minimum so that I would then actually use them all.*

In Johanna's narrative the shift from conventional appreciation of ownership to questioning it came rather rapidly as a result of a lifestyle transformation. Whereas previously Johanna's consumption has been guided by the ideal of it being "important to own a lot of clothes" she describes her "waking up to her own consumption hangover" when coming back home and being overwhelmed by the excess of her own clothes after having lived abroad for a while with only a few clothes. Coming back to her cherished clothes that she had anticipated for was a confusing experience for her as finally seeing her

clothes and getting to touch them didn't make her feel good but it rather made her question the reason to own such amounts of clothes and to even feel "*anxious about the amount of stuff*". Decluttering her wardrobe by letting go of the majority of what was in there liberated Johanna from her agony and burden of ownership, and she now describes her downsized wardrobe as "*easy*" and "*effortless*".

The practice Johanna engaged in can be seen to connect to the practice of voluntary simplicity in which a consumer voluntarily disposes items and engages in circulation of material in order to achieve clarity in identity (Cherrier, 2009) and to act upon several motivations such as environmental concerns and quest for minimalism (Alexander and Ussher, 2012). Even though the scope of decluttering activities wasn't as extensive in other's narratives, the same kind of realization to own consumption habits that resulted as a desire to decluttering became apparent in most of the other's accounts as well. Similarly, other informants also described realizing they own too much and starting to question the need to own all of it which made them want to dispose some of their possessions. This emerging internal realization was often provoked by external stimuli such as the visual reminder of the sheer amount of objects.

In some of the accounts, the idea of scaling down one's wardrobe was guided by using the size and space of the wardrobe as indicators in defining how much it is appropriate to own. Sara explains her experiences as follows:

*Sara: Before I was maybe a bit more kind of hoarder, but I think this is now quite reasonable. I don't know if it really is but in my own opinion this is quite reasonable. But at some point this was like that these used to burst out from here, and then it was just like you just had too much of it that then you just have to let go.*

Sara realized the need to scale down her wardrobe when the limits of the space of the wardrobe were confronted. The visual evidence that the clothing could not fit within the spatial limitations of the wardrobe acted as a signal for her to scale down the clothes and made her think she "*just had to let go*". After gradual adaptation of ideals praising decluttering Sara's clothes fill up only around half of the space of her wardrobe. A similar way of using the spatial limitations of the wardrobe as an initiator for decluttering practices became apparent in a majority of the interviews. The wardrobe's authority in defining the boundaries for, and controlling the appropriate amount of possessions, was agreed upon and looseness seemed to be a desired quality. Sofia, for example, also accounted having struggled with the material limitations of her wardrobe and having to "*try to push the door shut*"

which has made her start embracing liquid consumption. Emma and Maria then again accounted using decluttering methods cyclically when their wardrobes start to fill up again and they feel that “*this is enough now*” and that they “*need to start decluttering*”. Similar cyclical way of engaging in decluttering when confronting the material limitations of the wardrobe was accounted by most of the other informants too. The way how physical spatial restrictions act as a motivation for disposal activities is in line with what Ha-Brookshire and Hodges (2009), Laitala (2014), and Young Lee et al. (2013) have also found in previous research on disposition practices. In that sense the limited space of the wardrobe acts as an external stimulus that provokes action (Young Lee et al. 2013).

Whereas the shift to problematizing ownership-based clothes’ consumption in the previous cases was merely based on emerging internal frustration towards irrational consumption provoked by external stimuli in nearly all of the cases it was also partially provoked by an exposure to external ideals praising downsizing and more ethical and environmentally conscious consumption. The choice to scale down the possessions was hence also largely a conscious choice. Julia described her realization as follows:

*Julia: Lately I’ve started to pay more attention to environmental friendliness and ethicalness in clothing, so now it is like a really important criterion for me when it comes to dressing... Then you have like somehow become aware of... how you have consumed, so somehow started to think whether it makes any sense that why have I bought so many clothes, and started to think dressing and consumption of clothes maybe in a new way.*

As becomes evident in Julia’s narrative for her the adoption of ethical consumption ideologies took place over time. For her adopting values belonging to this abstract ideal of greener consumption has meant engaging in more deliberate and decreased purchases, and engaging in access-based consumption. Similar stories about starting to adopt ethical consumption values, reflecting own consumption against those values, and there after starting to embrace liquid consumption were recounted by most of the other informants as well. The clothes hanging in the closet seem to be visual reminders of consumerism and hence decluttering the wardrobe and that way rationalizing one’s clothing consumption meant being a greener consumer for these consumers. This is how Sofia sums up her experience in starting to engage in liquid consumption:

*Sofia: If they say that consumption is a way of communicating who we are so maybe you want to or maybe it feels good to say that like I recycle and like do those kind of more sustainable things. Like maybe that is my way of doing it.*

As Sofia put it, engaging in liquid consumption is a way for her to be greener consumer. This account sums up quite well how most of the participants experienced decluttering and access-based consumption as their ways of practicing environmentally conscious consumption. This is in line with findings of previous research as well, as seeing liquid consumption as more sustainable option has been found to be important motivator for engaging in liquid consumption in previous research too (Hamari et al., 2015; Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017).

#### 4.1.2 Restraining the Temptation to Buy

Restraining from the temptation to buy and engaging in more deliberate acquisition of new clothes was an essential part of scaling down the wardrobe and engaging in more liquid consumption in informants' accounts. Effort to make more deliberate purchases of new clothes was used as a tool in maintaining the scaled-down wardrobe and living up to the newly adopted consumption values. One theme that was brought up in most of the informants' narratives was the attempt to only buy when there was a need. When trying to buy only when there was a need the new purchases were reflected against the already possessed objects and their ability to bring value to the existing collection was contemplated upon.

*Julia: Then I think really deliberately that do I need like new clothes and that I would only buy when there is a need and those kind of long-lasting high-quality clothes... And in a clothing store you do think a lot that like how long I will use this garment and that is it worth it... Like do I want to keep this in my closet for long and shall I wear this...*

Similar to Julia's account the deliberation on whether something will be used, and for how long, were present in most of the informants' accounts. For Julia, sustainability issues were also important criteria on deliberating new purchases such as it was to other informants. Buying less and more ethically and using the clothes not necessarily needed only access-based was these consumers' way of being a greener consumer. Moreover, utilitarian values such as having something of "high-quality", "durable", and "matching well with other clothes" were highlighted in the accounts. Buying



clothes was seen as a long-term commitment by informants and they talked of wanting to purchase high-quality clothes that last long. Central to this was the quest for timeless styles which became apparent in almost all of the informants' accounts. For Laura deliberate purchases and timelessness meant avoiding rapidly changing fashions:

*Laura: I try to make clothing purchases more deliberately and not just based on what is really cool and really cool right now. That I've nowadays tried to start more considering clothing purchases like further so not only for certain season but for long-term purpose. I do own quite many clothes, but I've now managed to build my wardrobe quite well so that I have like very different clothes but many of them are the kind of clothes that I really like and some of them are really old too...*

In Laura's narrative her willingness to rationalize her consumption by escaping the fundamental nature of fast fashion that is based on constant change becomes apparent. She tried to defeat the rules of the fashion world by consuming clothes with more long-term orientation. The endeavor for timeless clothes as a tool for managing a scaled-down wardrobe and rationalizing one's consumption became apparent in other narratives, too. Even though many accounted for not having ever been that interested in fashion, they still accounted for having consumed clothes which symbols were transient. In a way, informants wanted to shield their wardrobe from the rules of fashion and from their own boredom by investing in timeless clothes that stretch beyond the short cycles of fashion. As all of the interviewees were young adults, or had just passed their young adulthood, this was also reflected as being part of the process of becoming an adult and finding one's own personal style. For example, Maria accounted that although she has never been a "shopaholic" the way she deliberates on purchasing new items has changed when she has "become more mature" and "found her own style". By restricting themselves from buying new, they could manage their downsized wardrobe and avoid the burdensome process of getting rid of something and then purchasing something new.

*Sofia: But like now I've also tried to restrain buying so that I wouldn't buy new... When you notice that there is not endless space, and then also my husband strongly thinks that there really isn't endless space, so then I always get some comments from there and like there is too much, and then there is always that own effort to get rid of those old so that is one thing, too. Like it's easier when you don't buy so you don't have to think, because then it doesn't feel that good when you have to throw them away.*

As becomes apparent in Sofia's account, the effort of getting rid of old clothes was perceived to be burdensome and not buying new clothes was seen to make consumption of clothes easier. This kind of reasoning was brought up in many interviews as informants described the whole consumption process including purchase, use, and disposal as a sort of commitment. Purchase decisions were described as deliberate decisions when the informants had to ponder whether they will like the piece of clothing for a long time, whether it is aligned with their ethical criteria, and whether it will last well. Acquiring new clothes also meant that informants have to store and find a place for it in the wardrobe. Eventually one needed to let go of the item which was mostly seen as the most burdensome part by many of the informants. The burdens related to disposal were mostly referred to the psychical burdens related to the guilt felt when disposing something that could still be used and finding an ethical way to dispose. Ha-Brookshire and Hodges (2009) found that keeping little worn clothes taking up space from the wardrobe and also making decisions on what to dispose and what not arouse feelings of guilt and anxiety in consumers. These accounts therefore support the findings of previous research regarding one motivation for engaging in liquid consumption being avoiding the obligations of ownership (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012). Hence, informants could avoid psychical burdens related to ownership by engaging in liquid consumption.

## **4.2 A Solid Core: Consequences of Embracing Liquid Consumption**

As described earlier, for most of the informants an important motive for starting to embrace liquid consumption was a quest for scaling down one's wardrobe. Engaging in access-based consumption provided consumers with certain solutions that helped living up to this ideal of a scaled-down wardrobe. Access-based consumption enabled engaging in consumption of different styles and communicating different identities, while still being able to maintain the amount of possessions low and distance oneself from the burdens of ownership. In this theme informants talked about the differences between owning and loaning clothes in terms of how they are used to communicate one's identity in the daily dress. Even though the feeling of wearing loaned clothing wasn't described as something special, the way these clothes were used in self-presentation differed remarkably in contrast to own clothes. The theme of the consequences of embracing liquid consumption is divided in four key areas: a solid core of important possessions, a rotation of loaned clothes around the solid core, endless opportunities for experimentation and novelty, and dealing with identity ambiguity.

#### 4.2.1 A Solid Core of Important Possessions

The practice of decluttering was most of the times guided by the motive of holding on to only possessions that either were in some way symbolically important to their owners, or had high use value. The objects which consumption was still desired to be solid, possessed either high symbolic value or high utilitarian use value to their owners. The quest for ownership on possessions that contained high symbolic value became apparent in Sara's description of some of her important clothes:

*Sara: My graduation dress, Unikko dress I brought from my parent's place just now. This is a bit worn out, or a little out of date especially, this blue Unikko, but this time will probably still come at some point. And this was the most adorable thing in the world when I graduated, so I believe it's time will come. You must not let it go... This is my most loved one when I was doing my exchange in Iceland. My Icelandic sweater. It was probably the most valuable item I bought back then...*

*Interviewer: Do you have some clothes that are especially important to you?*

*Sara: Well there were maybe those kind of that I probably won't let go at least like for the next ten years. Like example for that is my graduation dress because I expect that its time will still come. It has to come [laughs]. Then for example that Icelandic sweater, I wouldn't [let it go]. Somehow it will anyway then always remind me of the time there...*

It becomes evident in Sara's narrative that the items she wanted to hold on the most were the kind of objects that had high symbolic value to herself. The graduation dress was linked to a moment of self-achievement: graduation. Icelandic sweater then again was linked to her cherished memories of her exchange in Iceland and that way connected her identity to the past. When asking whether she had used those items she admitted not having used them almost at all. However, those items were kept in the wardrobe for their sentimental value and hence high reference to the self. This is consistent with Guy and Banim (2000) who state that clothes in the wardrobe store and help connecting the past, present, and future identities. As well as with Ahuvia (2005) who describes loved objects as having indexical value by connecting to key events in the life narrative. The same kind of quest for holding on to the objects with sentimental value to their owners when decluttering the wardrobe was accounted by most of the informants. For example, Johanna who had gotten rid of most of her clothes had still kept certain items that she didn't use much anymore. One of these was for example a denim vest to which she "had formed an emotional bond with because it had been with her in her travels

*and in other life events*”. This is in line with the argument of Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017) as they suggest that items relevant to the self are likely to be kept within solid consumption.

Besides items connecting to the past, relevance to the self became further realized in the discourse as informants described some of their important clothes being able to make them feel good, make them want to wear them, and make them feel “*so me*”. For example, Laura accounted having certain items that were “*so me that I don’t want anyone else to be in that garment*”. However, there were few exceptions to this as not all the informants verified this idea. Emma, Maria, and Julia expressed that they are not attached to any clothes, as “*it is just stuff*”. Although they stated they are not attached to clothing they still had a few special items that they talked fondly of. For example, when discussing about a knitted sweater Emma had received as a gift from her mother, she expressed that self-made clothes “*have that something unique*” and that it was one of her favorite clothes now. Also Julia spoke fondly of her favorite garment, a black skirt received as a gift from her mother. Maria had her mother’s old dress in her wardrobe and even though she didn’t wear it often she still felt like she didn’t want to dispose it. Hence, although denying on attaching to possessions, they still all had some items relevant to the self. Moreover, in their case possessions’ ability to connect with personal relationships, person-object-person relationship (Ahuvia, 2005), became apparent which was also present in some other interviews.

Another quality determining the position in the scaled-down wardrobe was the utilitarian use value as became apparent earlier in the context of buying new clothes. When decluttering the wardrobe, items that were useful in creating desired looks were still saved. This is how Johanna accounted it:

*Johanna: Or then that they are like useful like that random dotted shirt. Although it starts to look a bit worn out and it bores me a lot but still it is exactly the kind of like easy garment that I can wear at work and then because it... obviously can take anything.*

Johanna illustrated the importance of use value through explaining saving a dotted shirt because of its usefulness and durability when decluttering her possessions. Similarly, utilitarian use value became apparent in most of the accounts as informants described the kind of clothes they wanted to own with qualities such as “*versatile*”, “*high quality*”, and “*match well with each other*”. This is in line with the finding of Guy and Banim (2000) that in order to build desired identities it is important to have clothes that perform well and that are of high quality. However, it is a bit in contrast to what

Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017) argue as they assume that use value is more emphasized in the context of liquid consumption. It seems that there is a slight difference here in the context of clothes.

#### 4.2.2 Rotation of Loaned Clothes around a Solid Core of Own Clothes

The wardrobe that had gone through the act of decluttering seemed to form a solid core in the informants' clothes consumption practices. This idea of wardrobe as a solid core became apparent as informants talked of their collection of clothes in a way that they were committed to them over a longer period of time. Moreover, informants talked about how they cherished their clothes, and could trust on their ability to match with other clothes in the wardrobe and create desired looks. As already slightly touched upon earlier, clothes belonging to the solid core were either functional in their nature by being suitable for different occasions and matching well with other clothes in the wardrobe, or just “*so me*”—relevant to the consumer's sense of self. Whereas this very core was deliberately built, access-based consumption appeared to the informants as an opportunity to get rotation to their dress and variety to styles.

*Johanna: During the year the idea of combining those that I have to that I have those kind of nice and basic good-quality clothes in my own wardrobe over certain period of time and then I can use the clothing library more for kind of playing out and trying different things became maybe a bit more refined.*

Johanna accounts her idea of combining her own “*basic good-quality*” clothes to those she could access through clothing library. The way she described her own clothes made it apparent that those were of high use value and long-term commitment, whereas the clothes she consumed access-based were utilized for getting variety to styles. Expression such as “*different*” and “*new kind of*” were highly used for describing access-based clothes consumption whereas own clothes were described as “*basics*”, “*essentials*”, and “*timeless*” in other informants' accounts as well. The same kind of division between own clothes and loan clothes in terms of their qualities and use became apparent in most of the narratives. Even though many accounted for not being that interested in fashion, they were still interested in getting to play out with their style when using clothes access-based. Many clothes in the context of solid consumption were described with terms that reflected high use value whereas clothes used access-based were described with terms reflecting high symbolic value. This again is in contrast to how Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017) divide liquid and solid consumption, as in their conceptualization

symbolic value is more related to solid consumption and use value in liquid consumption. Sara's account supports this notion:

*Sara: And then I use the clothing library which has kind of made it that I don't have to buy that much because I get so much variety through it. So you try that those you buy would be versatile clothes and kind of timeless. So through the clothing library you like get to play out [laughs] and then own clothes are more those kind of basics nowadays.*

For Sara engaging in access-based consumption of clothes helped her in her endeavor of purchasing less new clothes as she got variety to her dress through access-based consumption of clothes. This was central in other's accounts as well. Moreover, Sara also made a clear division between own clothes and loan clothes by describing her own clothes as “basics” and loan clothes as something she can “play out” with similarly as Johanna did. This was common in many other accounts as well as informants accounted for using the access-based consumption for trying out different styles. The words used in other accounts included also words such as: “bolder choices” (Sofia) and “something new for me” (Emma). Hence, access-based consumption seems to be used for identity experimentation.

Moreover, Sara accounted the clothes loaning also being partly a way to challenge her own style. This was apparent in other accounts as well. Hence, besides identity experimentation, access-based consumption seems to be used for reaching out to new desired identities. This relates to Ahuvia's (2005) conception of self-transformation in which consumption can help to challenge current identities, and even entail distrust of personal tastes. Indeed, as became apparent in informant accounts, they did engage in trying out objects with styles they were not familiar with and even considered as slightly questionable. For example, Emma accounted taking more risks when trying out and then maybe finding out that it was “not her thing”. Also Sara talked about trousers she had loaned that were “not at all her style”, but thought that maybe those kind of items open some new worlds for her and challenge her current style.

*Sofia: And maybe it is quite important in it that you get that rotation. That when kind of your own same clothes rotate always... So in that I get that it doesn't always feel like she is kind of using the same clothes. So I can wear then those specific [clothes] and I get that novelty from those [loaned clothes].*

Sofia referred in her account the rotation that she was able to get through access-based consumption. She talked of not wanting to always use the same clothes for work because of how her colleagues would perceive her. This same kind of idea was present in other accounts as well. For example, Johanna also talked about getting bored with her own clothes when she had to wear the same clothes for work a lot. The need for variety of styles was still present and even more realized when informants had committed to decluttering their wardrobe and limiting the purchase of new. The need for variety in daily dress was fulfilled by engaging in access-based consumption rather than accumulating possessions to wardrobe. Hence, informants seemed to be seeking for a rotation of different styles through liquid consumption around the solid core of their own stable and trustworthy collection of clothes. This finding links with Guy and Banim (2000) who found that it is important for consumers to be able to highlight different aspects of themselves through different styles. Therefore, rotation of access-based objects brought opportunities for expanding one's identity and highlighting different aspects of identity.

#### 4.2.3 Endless Opportunities for Experimentation and Novelty

The rotation of clothes provides consumers with endless opportunities of experimentation and novelty without having to commit to ownership as accounted by informants. Before engaging in access-based consumption informants managed the need for identity experimentation by buying new clothes, which also resulted in an accumulation of possessions and a requirement for committing to obligations of ownership. Access-based consumption was described by informants as enabling themselves to engage in experimentation without having to commit to the negative aspects of ownership.

*Emma: You don't have to have bad conscience [laughs] ... You can buy clothes weekly without actually buying them. Like you get new clothes every week without having to think that now I have spent some money again and now I have like bought clothes again that I use only a little and then they end up, well, they end up being recycled...*

In her account Emma talked about the bad conscience related to clothes consumption she can avoid by engaging in access-based consumption. The bad conscience was related to failing in different obligations of ownership such as commitment to extensive use and sustainable method of disposal. Engaging in access-based consumption of clothes also meant letting go commitment as described by informants. Informants talked of access-based consumption as liberating themselves from

commitment while enabling the possibilities for experimentation and novelty. This notion of liberation from commitment and obligations of ownership is clearly in line with previous research regarding access-based consumption and liquid consumption (Belk, 2007; Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012). This was also realized, as informants talked of not usually trying on clothes before loaning them where as they always wanted to try on clothes before buying them. Julia describes the opportunity for novelty and experimentation as follows:

*Julia: I thought it was really nice that you could get that feeling that you get from a new garment... And then that feeling always already faded away when you use that garment two or three times or couple of times and then you got to return them and then take new instead and like without that bad conscience that you just dispose those clothes... So it was always really exciting to go and see what there is... So then you had in a way chance to try out like really different clothes...*

Similarly, as in Julia's account, the sensation of novelty and opportunities for experimentation access-based consumption was also central in other's accounts of clothing library. Julia expressed the feeling fading way fast, which is in line with the arguments of Belk et al. (2003) regarding the short-lived nature of desire for new. Furthermore, informants maximized the sensations of novelty and opportunities for experimentation by employing certain practices such as visiting the service in short regular intervals and deciding to each time take something new and different. Most of the informants talked about how they wanted to avoid loaning the same clothes multiple times in order not to "waste the opportunity to always try something new" as Johanna put it. Hence, important in access-based consumption seemed to be to maximize the possibility for identity experimentation and the sensation of novelty when own clothes had long ago worn off their newness.

#### 4.2.4 Dealing with Identity Ambiguity

It became apparent that informants were fond of the symbols the clothes in the clothing library and clothing library as a way of consumption entailed. As already discussed earlier, informants saw engaging in access-based consumption as a more ethical and environmentally friendly form of consumption, and perceived it to be favorable to communicate that to others. In addition to that, the clothing library's values related to ethical and environmental concerns and the clothes as tools to



communicate those values were highly present in informant accounts as favorable imageries employed in identity expression.

*Julia: And I always felt good like in a way when I was wearing the garment and like usually they were some a bit more special, so then people asked that where is that garment from and then you got the chance to tell about the clothing library [laughs]. So it was like nice and so I liked to kind of stand for that kind of ideology. So it felt nice... But then sometimes it felt a bit contradictory sometimes that if you had for example some skirt from the clothing library and then you had like some H&M's shirt or then there was a slight... funny conflict that you would have liked to like fully represent that idea but you couldn't... the combination just looked nice and then I wanted to wear that even though it didn't represent the ideal I would have liked to.*

As becomes apparent in Julia's account, for her it was important to employ clothes from clothing library as cues of ideology related to ethical and environmentally friendlier consumption. This was apparent in other accounts as well. For example, Sofia also spoke about "*the image of ethicality*" being important for her, and her liking the the opportunity to tell that her clothes are from clothing library. This is in line with Lawson et al. (2016) who argued that for some consumers it is important to signal sustainability through accessing shared goods. Also Bardhi and Eckhardt (2012) note that access-based consumption entails symbolic capital by being ecological consumption mode. However, for Julia combining clothes from clothing library to own clothes caused conflicts, as she was not able to "*fully represent the image*" she wished. This was because she perceived that her own clothes didn't stand for the same values as the clothes from clothing library did. Clothing library enabled her to express an identity she couldn't express similarly through her own clothes. Hence, it seems that some informants used clothing library to deal with identity ambiguity related to the inability to maintain coherent identity of environmental commitment. This is related to the findings of Seregina and Scouten (2017) that consumption may help resolving identity ambiguity that results from unmanageable or incomprehensible identities. However, in this case it seems that using access-based consumption might not have resolved identity ambiguity, it seems to help dealing with it, as the desired identity related to environmental commitment may be fostered through loaning clothes, which wasn't similarly possible with own clothes.

Although other informants didn't account same kind of conflicts when combining own clothes with loaned clothes, they still emphasized the importance of clothing library as providing opportunities to employ certain symbols the clothes entailed in their identity expression:

*Maria: So then it's somehow nice that you get access to those kind of high quality clothes that you wouldn't buy to yourself... So like I think it is really nice concept that there are those Finnish designers' clothes because they are like for sure expensive to produce here in Finland and so then their price is quite high so then that you don't have to buy that to yourself.*

Maria accounted it being important for her to get access to brands that she couldn't afford to buy herself, but that carried certain favorable images. Maria lacked the capital to live fully to the desired lifestyle of environmental commitment, and hence clothing library helped her deal with identity ambiguity. The brands available in the library were local brands to whom ethical and environmental concerns were central values, and hence the imageries related to those brands and their products seemed to be favorable for the informants. Although informants didn't always remember the exact brand of the accessed item they were wearing, they still seemed to be keen on identifying themselves with the symbols the clothes contained. The clothes from clothing library were highly used by many of the informants as symbols of greener consumption and were used in constructing their identities related to environmental commitment. This further helped informants in dealing with identity ambiguity that resulted from not wanting or being able to fully live up to this lifestyle through traditional ownership. Not wanting to live fully up to it seemed to be related to the need to also have variety in style. Not being able to live up to it was related to not having the needed capital to do so. Access-based consumption helped in dealing with the identity ambiguity and resolving identity conflicts through enabling informants to identify with symbols available in clothing library. This is in contrast to previous research as Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017) assume consumers avoid identifying with the accessed objects and that liquid consumption doesn't entail identity value for consumers.

#### **4.3 Getting Attached to Access-based Goods**

In this theme informants expressed the way liquid consumption became problematized as they started getting attached to clothes accessed through clothing library. Even though using clothes access-based was originally thought as a liberating act without having to have any commitment on the clothes most of the informants admitted having become attached to certain loaned clothes. All though not all

informants wanted to agree on having been *attached* to any item, the signs of some level of attachment became evident as informants expressed desire to own, or difficulty of letting go, related to certain loaned clothes. There were three separate sub themes related to forming attachment to access-based goods: different practices in taking care of the clothes, the idea of own wardrobe attracting more similar kind of clothes, and different strategies informants applied in coping with the temptation.

#### 4.3.1 Mine versus Ours: Taking Care of the Clothes

In all of the accounts it became apparent that informants had different practices in taking care of own clothes versus loaned clothes, which further highlighted the division of the objects within liquid and solid consumption, and problematized the use of access-based services. All of the informants described taking better care of loaned clothes compared to own clothes.

*Sofia: Somehow you treat them even more carefully because you think it's someone else's. So maybe with own clothes I wash them more carelessly and use but with those... checks the care label somehow really carefully and somehow puts the clothes in wash bags and like something else that I don't then necessarily do with my own clothes that I just throw them to the machine and turn on the washing cycle. But with that (clothing library) you hope that those common (clothes) would remain as long as possible.*

The idea of the loaned clothes not being their own and being “*common*”, and therefore requiring better care, was apparent in informant narratives. Informants seemed to feel some sort of shared responsibility towards keeping the common clothes in good shape. Moreover, the clothes within the liquid consumption were said to be taken better care of compared to own clothes. Only own “*better category*” clothes were taken as good care of. This finding could be related to the concept of attachment, as it has been found that consumers are likely to take better care of products they are attached to (Mugge et al. 2005). These shared objects were taken better care of in order to make them last longer, to make it nice for the next user, and to avoid humiliation of not being able to take care well enough. The feeling of humiliation resulting in ruining a piece of clothing was related to one's inability of taking proper care of garment. This was contrasting to what Bardhi and Eckhardt (2012) found in their study in the context of access-based consumption of cars as their informants accounted not taking at all good care of the cars and not thinking about the other users. However, this could be explained with what Schaefer et al. (2016b) found that consumers take better care when the brand

was strong, the service was more personal, and there was community identification. The service was described as personal and the brands favorable, which could explain partially the reasons for better maintenance practices.

There were several practices informants carried out in order to take good care of loaned clothes. Even though overall informants said they didn't feel any special whether wearing loaned or own clothes, they still talked about being more aware when eating, and not taking clothes with them when travelling because "*you get messy when travelling*" as Sara put it. Clothes were washed by taking a better look at the care label, and usually even washed by hand, which the informants said they did not normally do with their own clothes. Moreover, some informants even stored clothes in a bit different place compared to own clothes. Loan clothes could always be hanging even though own same type of clothes would be stored in shelves. However, this behaviour changed a bit over time as became apparent in the accounts of informants who had used the service for a longer time. Maria, Sara, and Johanna who had used the service for over a year told about having been more cautious before but having relaxed over time. This could be explained with the findings of Fernandez and Lastovicka (2005) related to differences in disposal practices of objects transferring from "*me*" to "*not me*" compared to objects transferring from "*me*" to "*we*". It may be that in these cases there was no need to erase private meanings from these items through better cleaning as informants might have formed at some level sense of "*we-ness*" with other members of the clothing library over time.

#### 4.3.2 The Core Attracts More

In most of the accounts became apparent instances where informant had formed some level of attachment with the loaned object. It became apparent through informant accounts that garments that informants became attached with can be seen as positioned in the boundary between liquid and solid consumption as they break free from the essential promises of access-based consumption. In the case of these clothes the relevance of the self or the use value was high and hence prolonged access or even ownership was desired. This becomes apparent in Sara's experience:

*Sara: Well I have bought this one dress from there. I had loaned it several times from there... so this was really kind of versatile. You could use it during the weekdays and then in a little more festive. I just liked this model and the cut, the versatility, and then when it was there for sale I was like well let's take it home... Like when I said that I maybe kind of play out more*

*with them (clothes from clothing library) but it was kind of basic that you could call basic choices. The kind of clothes that you can wear in many occasions. Kind of versatile, comfortable. Still it had a bit of playfulness as the hem was kind of that it was longer from one side...*

Whereas predominantly Sara described loaned clothes being something very different to own clothes by using opposing qualities this loan dress that had earned its position in the carefully managed wardrobe possessed similar qualities Sara connected to her own clothes. These qualities were such as: “*versatile*” and “*basic*” whereas typically loan clothes were described as “*a bit crazier*” or “*something you could get bored with*”. Garments that became own clothes from being loaned clothes and hence changed their position from liquid to solid consumption were described with similar set of words that informants used in describing most of their own clothes. These certain qualities seemed to make them prospects of something to own rather than only loan. Mostly, these qualities were related to high use value. This becomes further illustrated in Maria’s account on a jacket she bought from the clothing library:

*Maria: Well I had worn or loaned it at some point and I thought it was like really useful or easy to wear but still somehow a bit special. So then because of that I bought it when it happened to be there for sale. But like it was nice. And then I have some other too or I have not bought but in a way that there you get to try things and if there is something you want to like always take so then you probably should buy it for yourself. I actually feel bad about a sweater that is super nice but now it is not there in the clothing library anymore so maybe someone has bought it...*

Maria accounted for having bought a jacket for it had high use value but was still “*a bit special*”. Moreover, she accounted for having felt a bit bad for losing access to an item she had slightly attached to. Signs of slight attachment to objects became apparent through feeling bad for losing access in other informants’ narratives too as few other informants also accounted for having slight negative feelings when returning certain items as being able to access them again wasn’t guaranteed. However, the negative feelings aroused by loss of objects seemed to be rather minute as it was accounted by informants as being “*a bit difficult to let go*”. This finding is a bit in contrast to previous research on access-based consumption as it has been argued that access-based consumption as a simpler form of consumption liberates consumers of such emotional obligations related to ownership (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012). Hence, it shows that there can be negative feelings related to loss of object

traditionally found in solid consumption (Belk, 1988) experienced in the context liquid consumption too. However, not all informants confirmed this as Johanna and Sara accounted for returning an item not feeling “*any special*” and focused on getting something new.

However, the uncertain nature of future access was one reason for desiring ownership of an item as becomes realized in Johanna’s narrative:

*Johanna: I had a skirt that I loaned probably two or even three times... It was really beautiful, then really kind of simple and it was really easy to combine it with my own clothes... I considered buying it for myself... Well probably because then I would have it always in use and well then I could myself decide when I can use it... Or then you are just so hardly fallen for that garment that it would be nice to have it as your own.*

To reason her interest of owning a skirt rather than loaning Johanna expressed the wish to have it always in use. Control is highly related to ownership (Belk, 1988) and the account of Johanna illustrates well how consumers understand the terms of access-based consumption in a sense that one needs to give up control when engaging in access-based consumption. Similarly, control may be desired and consumers seem to understand that it can be gained by gaining the ownership. The ownership was desired for its symbolic aspects as well as Johanna accounted for it being nice to have it as her own.

#### 4.3.3 Strategies on Coping with the Attachment: Sticking to the Plan and Prolonging the Access

Becoming attached to loaned clothes and desiring the ownership of them was problematizing for consumers and they wanted to restrain themselves from such desire to buy and keep the liquid access-based consumption separate from ownership. Emerging feelings of attachment and desire to own were unexpected and undesirable as they were opposite to the fundamental promises that liquid consumption holds: liberation and independence. Julia described her experience as follows:

*Julia: It was the only garment that made me feel that I want to buy this to myself... I did seriously think about buying that dress but then there was kind of higher barrier to kind of buy those clothes as you had started that with the idea to just like loan them. So then you couldn't maybe kind of change your mind to that I could actually kind of buy this.*

For Julia it was difficult to change her mindset from loaning to buying something. In this sense practices related to owning and practices related to accessing seem to be perceived as completely opposite alternatives that one has to keep separate and not mix with each other. Although Julia didn't buy that dress she still expressed being open towards buying something else from there. In contrast to this, Sofia resolved the same kind of tension differently:

*Sofia: I usually go there every two weeks, sometimes every week and then sometimes I stretch it to three weeks especially if it has felt difficult for me to let some item go. But then I've decided that I won't buy those clothes even though it is possible because then it would lose its point that in that way I get rid of those clothes and get nice new ones if I don't buy them... During this time, I do have attached to many loaned clothes that I would have kind of maybe bought if I would have started [to buy]. So in a way it has probably been quite good decision because otherwise I would probably already have bought several of them for my own... I kind of carried a lot of discussions with myself that it doesn't make any sense that I buy them because then I could just go to a store and buy those clothes if I wanted to have them as my own.*

The excerpt of Sofia illustrates well the inner struggle she faced in the moments when attachment and desire to own had been experienced in the context of liquid consumption. Experiencing this made her feel the need to create clear boundaries for herself. She chose a strategy of not buying anything and sticking to her original purpose in using clothing library in order to cope with this tension. This Sofia justified to herself by rationalizing the situation that it “*doesn't make any sense*” to buy the clothes that she loaned as the reason to engage in access-based consumption for her was to restrain from buying. Seems that there was a need for her to control her behavior by making that kind of justifications and strategies.

Even though not all the informants were such extreme with their stance in coping with the temptation to own they still employed different strategies other than purchase. These strategies included prolonging the temporary ownership, relying on the future possibilities of regaining the access, and reminding of the possibility for upgrade when getting to take something else instead. Informant accounts revealed that informants tended to engage in prolonging the temporary ownership in case it felt difficult to let something go. This became apparent as many participants described moments when they had found it difficult to let something go and then kept it for “*one more week*”. Also the promise

of perhaps being able to loan the item again in the future made the informants avoid the negative feelings that could arise of letting go. For example, Emma says as follows:

*Emma: Well sometimes when you find something good it would be nice to keep it for longer, but then you also know that you get hooked to that feeling that you want to see what new there is. So then you maybe rather return that nice and then take something a bit worse so that you can see what nice there is... I can loan it if I see it there some other time.*

Emma's coping strategy for the difficulty of letting go was reminding herself about the attraction of novelty which was one of the essential motives for her in engaging in access-based consumption. Returning something allowed her to continue engaging in the endless sensation of novelty and perhaps replace the object with something even better. Moreover, she reminded herself about the opportunity to in a way maintain the access by having the chance to loan it again although it was not guaranteed as previously discussed. Although unsecure in nature this opportunity of maintaining the access took away the infinity of parting. This kind of mental processing was apparent in other accounts as well. Attachment was avoided and desire to own was put aside by sticking to the fundamental promises of experimentation and novelty access-based consumption entailed for the informants. Objects were considered to be replaceable with the exciting feeling the access to another new object provided. Informants also realized that the novelty fades away quickly and hence preferred to put away the temptation to buy. This is in line with the findings of Belk et al. (2003) that the joy related to realizing the desire i.e. purchasing something desired is brief and is soon replaced with boredom and desire for something else.

## **5 DISCUSSION**

The findings of the study provide with important understanding of the relation of liquid consumption to identity, ownership, and attachment. The findings of the study rely heavily on the literature of construction-through-consumption (Belk, 1988; Ahuvia, 2005; Schembri et al., 2010) and liquid consumption (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017) by providing ideas of where these avenues of research may encounter. The mere findings of the study are related to understanding how liquid and solid consumption coexist in consumers' lives, how they both have important value for identity, and how the person-object relationships may be problematized in liquid consumption. These are further discussed below and linked with the existing theories.



## **5.1 Coexistence of Liquid and Solid Consumption**

The findings of this study shows that solid and liquid consumption exist together in the context of clothes consumption as the users of clothing library prefer having a solid core of own wardrobe around which the liquid collection of clothes of the clothing library are rotated. Hence, the findings of this study support the arguments of Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017) assuming that liquid and solid consumption can co-exist in a way that there are middle points within the spectrum of liquid and solid consumption, and that liquid consumption can re-solidify. This is realized as consumers engaging in access-based consumption of clothes are still strongly engaged with their own possessed clothes, the wardrobe, and also aspire to solidify certain clothes within the liquid consumption by expressing the desire to own certain clothes in the clothing library. Furthermore, the study supports many of the arguments related to the traditional form of consumption, ownership, by showing that certain possessions help connecting with the past identity (Belk, 1988; Guy and Banim, 2000; Ahuvia, 2005). The differences between liquid and solid consumption in the ways they support consumers in their identity work and the differences in the nature of ownership became apparent in the findings of the study and are further discussed.

### **5.1.1 Liquid Consumption as a Source for Flexible Identity Experimentation**

Building on the existing literature the findings of this study show that access-based consumption of clothes is desirable alternative for ownership as it: liberates from burdens of ownership (e.g. Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012; Schaefers et al., 2016a), provides a more sustainable alternative (e.g. Hamari et al., 2015; Lawson et al., 2016), and enables engaging in flexible identity projects (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012). However, in contrast to the existing conceptualization of liquid consumption (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017), this study suggest that the mere value access-based consumption of clothes provides is symbolic. Relying on the literature of construction-through-consumption (Belk, 1988; Ahuvia, 2005; Schembri et al., 2010), the findings suggest that consumers use access-based consumption in their identity construction through accessing signs and symbols relevant to them. Being able to flexibly access attractive imageries employing them in communicating identity to others provides symbolic value to consumers. This is in contrast to Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017) as they argue liquid consumption to be mostly based on use value, and is an answer to their request of searching for contexts where symbolic value can emerge in liquid consumption. Hence, the study adds to the understanding of liquid consumption by showing that clothing is a context where symbolic value of access-based consumption may be even more relevant than use value.

Access-based consumption of clothes seems to be used in identity work three ways: seeking variety in identity expressions, engaging in flexible identity experimentation, and reaching out for desirable identities. By building on to the findings of Chen (2008) that access to art provides a way to escape dullness and repetition, and to the notion of Lawson et al. (2016) that access-based consumption provides opportunities for variety seeking, this study finds that central in access-based consumption is seeking variety in identity expressions. This study shows that access-based consumption enables consumers to communicate the multifaceted nature of one's identity by enabling access to an endless amount of different signs and symbols. As consumers' identities are continuously evolving (Ahuvia, 2005), there is constant need for change in clothing, styles, and fashion, too (Niinimäki, 2010). Indeed, one central value access-based consumption provides is the possibility to enrich one's identity expression through constantly changing material artefacts around oneself without having to commit to them. While traditionally one's self-presentation is seen as limited to the clothes available in one's wardrobe (Cwerner, 2001), access-based consumption enables consumers to break free from the limits of the identity expression set by their own clothes collection by giving access to an extensive amount of different signs and symbols to be used in their self-presentations. Hence, aligned with Lawson et al. (2016) consumers are able to experience something they normally couldn't as they are able to expand their identity expression.

Besides getting to express identities in their multifaceted nature, access-based consumption of clothes also enables consumers to engage in identity experimentation of possible selves without having to commit to consumption objects. This expands the idea of Bardhi and Eckhardt (2012) that access-based consumption enables flexible identity projects. Findings of the present study show that imageries available through access-based consumption is used for trying out different, new imageries that challenge the current self-presentation and for testing possible future selves. This finding is in line with Lawson et al. (2016) who found that the ability to test a product without ownership is important in access-based consumption, and expands the notion by introducing the importance of this possibility in the practice of identity verification. Moreover, as consumers are willing to behave consistently with their identities (Reed et al., 2012), identity experimentation seems to be closely related to avoiding negative self-images which results in wearing clothing that's not coherent with self (Banister and Hogg, 2004; Van der Laan and Velthuis, 2016). Access-based consumption allows consumers to more risks in identity experimentation as they can quickly circulate an item and discard the imageries related to it if it fails to convey the desired image. Hence, findings link to Guy and Banim (2000) and suggest that identity experimentation through liquid consumption of clothes is

related to two practices: ‘the woman I want to be’ —projecting positive self-image and ‘the woman I am not’ —avoiding negative images.

Lastly, the study found that consumers also use access-based consumption of clothes in constructing desired identities that, in this context, were found to be merely related to environmental commitment. This finding is based on and expands the current understanding of the potential of consumption in helping to transform the self to certain desired form (Ahuvia, 2005). Reaching for a desired identity related to environmental commitment happens through identifying oneself with the symbols and signs entailed to the access-based consumption as a consumption form and to the objects available through it. In line with the previous research, this study finds that access-based consumption is seen as a more sustainable alternative (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012; Hamari et al. 2015), and hence the consumption form itself is found to support consumers in reaching for the desired identity of environmental commitment. In addition, identifying with the symbols related to consumption objects was found to help in reaching for that desired identity as brands available in clothing library carried imageries relevant to it. This is in contrast to findings of Bardhi and Eckhardt (2012) related to that consumers avoid identifying themselves with the accessed objects, and hence provides with new understanding through illustrating the importance of linking value in access-based consumption of clothes. At the same time, these findings respond to the request of Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017) to identify contexts where identity and linking value are relevant in liquid consumption. Even though in this context the symbols related to consumption objects were merely related to environmental commitment, the same idea could be applicable in contexts where symbols and desired identities are different.

Furthermore, for some consumers these imageries may be normally out of reach and hence consuming those imageries access-based may be a key in reaching for the desired identity as found in the study. This finding is built on the existing research of identity ambiguity (Seregina and Schouten, 2017) and identity conflicts (Ahuvia, 2005). Access-based consumption provides consumers an opportunity to go beyond what they normally can (Lawson et al., 2016), and hence deal with identity ambiguity that may result from insufficient capital (Seregina and Schouten, 2017). The findings show that consumers struggle in living fully up to the desired lifestyles due to not having the needed capital, and access-based consumption may help in dealing with that identity ambiguity by enabling reaching for desired identities without having to fully live up to them. Furthermore, findings suggest that access-based consumption may help solving identity conflicts in case the desired identity is in conflict with current identities as informants in this study had conflicting desires of being environmentally committed and yet wanting to consume different styles. This expands Ahuvia’s (2005) findings of the consumption

objects' ability to resolve identity conflicts by proposing that access-based consumption as a form of consumption may help resolving identity conflicts. This because access-based consumption is perceived to be more sustainable (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012; Hamari et al. 2015), and yet it enables variety-seeking and accessing new styles (Lawson et al., 2016; Lang and Armstrong, 2018).

In summary, the study adds to the current understanding of liquid consumption by suggesting that access-based consumption can be used in consumers' identity work. To answer to the questions of Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017) this study shows that liquid consumption can provide consumers also with symbolic, identity, and linking value besides the commonly noted use value. In this study consumers are found to use access-based consumption in identity work in three ways: identity expression, identity experimentation, and reaching for desirable identities. By introducing this, the study also builds on the existing literature of identity construction in consumption and construction-through consumption phenomena (Belk, 1988; Ahuvia, 2005). The possibilities consumption is found to create for flexible, reflexive, and creative identity expression (Maguire and Stanway, 2008) are enhanced in access-based consumption. Furthermore, access-based consumption allows for multiplicity of identities through providing access to a variety of signs and symbols for a temporary time, and helps in reaching for desired identities and solving identity conflicts.

### **5.1.2 Solid Consumption as a Source for Coherent Identity**

Findings of this study show that although consumers start to embrace liquid consumption of clothes, solid consumption of clothes still has an important role in the identity construction. The study agrees with previous research on that consumers place less emphasis on possessions when starting to embrace liquid consumption (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017) by finding that consumers participate in decluttering practices in order to scale down their possessions and have less material commitments. However, the notion of we are what we own (Belk, 1988) seems to still be partially valid as even when engaging in liquid consumption, consumers place emphasis on their own clothes, and desire to maintain the ownership of them. This solid core of identity tokens consists of items used in everyday self-presentation and items kept for their containing sentimental value and personal meaning although being unused.

In line with previous research (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017) the present study shows that long-term orientation and trust are central qualities of solid consumption as consumers want to possess clothes

that are durable, timeless, and that succeed in delivering wished looks. This finding also connects with the previous research on traditional ownership that also highlights the importance of trust. For example, Guy and Banim (2000) have argued it being important to own clothes that can be depended on in creating desirable images. Hence, maintaining ownership provide long-term security for consumers when also engaging in liquid consumption.

Another important quality defining solid consumption is high relevance to the self, and the objects entailing high relevance to the self are kept still within solid consumption. This is in line with Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017) as they assume that items whose relevance to the self is high are more likely to belong to solid consumption. Clothes close to the consumers' sense of self (Niinimäki, 2010) described in the interviews as "*so me*" are still important in solid consumption. Also objects carrying high indexical value though connecting consumers' identities to the past life events or to other people are kept within solid consumption. This supports the finding of Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017) that possessions connecting consumers with their past identities can become problematic in liquid consumption. Indeed, when decluttering their possessions, some informants of this study found it difficult to dispose items that were important in defining their identities as they reminded them of certain cherished past events or connected to other people. This shows that Belk's (1988) argument that possessions help connecting the past, present, and future selves is still central in solid consumption and connects with the findings of Chen (2008) that ownership provides with an ability to continuously engage with the object and contemplate it over time. Moreover, the indexical value of being able to connect with personal relationships, person-thing-person relationship, which Ahuvia (2005) found to be central in important objects seems to be still relevant quality in objects within solid consumption. Hence, possessions seem to have important role in the identity work by helping to maintain consistent identities and connect to important life events and relationships.

In contrast to the findings of previous research, this study also suggests that use value and practical benefits are relevant in solid consumption of clothes. Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017) suggest that use value is merely related to liquid consumption whereas symbolic value is mostly related to solid consumption. However, the findings of this research suggest that in the context of clothes both symbolic value and use value are important in solid consumption. Importance of use value in solid consumption is realized as consumers want to own clothes that are durable, versatile, useful, and of high quality materials. Moreover, consumers emphasize the importance to find essentials in one's own wardrobe when also using access-based consumption of clothes. Ownership also provides use value through having clothes always in use. Hence, surprisingly enough use value and functional

aspects seem to be relevant in solid consumption in this highly symbolic context of clothes consumption. However, this is in line with Van der Laan and Velthuis (2016) who stressed the importance of practical aspects of getting dressed.

All in all, in line with previous research (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017) this study suggests that when also engaging in access-based consumption of clothes the important functions of solid consumption seem to lie in providing long-term security and constructing coherent identities that connect with the past. Clothes still kept are trustworthy and carry personal meaning. Study also adds to the current understanding by suggesting that ownership has also important utilitarian value by providing practical benefits for everyday dressing. The clothing collection still possessed can be seen merely as tools for the practice of consistent identity management through ordinary everyday dressing (Guy and Banim, 2000). Whereas liquid consumption of clothing is found to be merely used for seeking variety in identity expressions and identity experimentation, solid core of own clothing collection seems to provide with practicality and consistency. Moreover, the solid core of identity tokens can be seen to be used in authenticating act of anchoring identity and maintaining coherent identity over time which has been found to be important in consumption of clothes Van der Laan and Velthuis (2016). Hence, the study finds that currently access-based consumption of clothing provides consumers with additional sources for identity experimentation but traditional ownership still has an important role in everyday self-presentation and constructing identity over time.

## **5.2 Problematic Person-object Relationships**

This research finds that person-object relationships can be problematized in both liquid and solid consumption. Findings on the study build on existing research of obligations of ownership (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012; Ha-Brookshire and Hodges, 2009), and introduce ways how liquid consumption may liberate consumers from burdens of ownership in the studied context of clothing. Although liquid consumption is ought to be based on flexibility (Barhdi and Ekchardt, 2012), this study finds that there seem to still be points in liquid consumption where the person-object relationships are problematized as consumers may get attached to access-based goods. Moreover, the study suggests that the person-object relationship may not be that uncomplicated in liquid consumption as it finds the maintenance practices of access-based goods being different from those owned.

### 5.2.1 Liquid Consumption as a Tool for Wardrobe Management

This study relies on the notion of clothes as everyday collection (Woodward and Greasley, 2017). The finding that consumers still want to maintain ownership to selected set of clothes even when participating in access-based consumption could be related to the fact that clothes collection has been seen as personal collection (Woodward and Greasley, 2017), and that collections have more central part in one's self compared to isolated, individual items (Belk, 1988). Indeed, the findings of this study suggest that wardrobe is seen as a collection that is desired to be selected set of items enabling coherent identity construction, and hence supports previous findings of Belk (1991) on the importance of selectivity, activity, and longitudinal engagement in constructing. Solid consumption of clothes, maintenance of a coherent wardrobe, is experienced as burdensome and is further problematized by the obligations of ownership. Therefore, liquid consumption is embraced through its promise of liberating from these burdens. Hence, the findings of the study are in line with previous research in the notion that starting to embrace liquid consumption is driven by the quest to escape the burdens of ownership (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012; Schaefer et al., 2016a). This endeavor for liquid consumption realized in the practices of decluttering their own wardrobe, and starting to consume clothes access-based.

In the context of clothes, the burdens of ownership are found to be related to each phase of consumption cycle: acquisition, use, and disposition. Based on the findings of Belk (1991) on the importance of selectivity in collection maintenance, the findings of the study show that consumers use deliberate thinking before purchasing clothing in order to ensure it fits to the collection, will be used, and will last long. However, it became apparent in the study that when consumption of clothes is purely solid, the wardrobe easily ends up containing clothes that are not used. In line with the findings of Ha-Brookshire and Hodges (2009) the study finds that unused clothes create negative feelings due to reminding of unsustainable consumption behavior and due to taking up space from the wardrobe. Liquid consumption is found to help consumers to experiment different styles without commitment to ownership, which furthermore helps consumers in avoiding accumulating clothes with transient imageries to their wardrobes and keep the clothes collection as a solid core.

In line with previous research on disposal (Ha-Brookshire and Hodges, 2009; Young Lee et al., 2013; Laitala, 2014) this study illustrates the role of spatial restrictions as a motivation for disposal activities. Disposal is burdensome as consumers have to confront their unsustainable consumption behavior when disposing items not completely worn out, and as they are willing to find way of

disposing that is in line with their values. This finding supports the finding of Ha-Brookshire and Hodges (2009) regarding the guilt experienced in disposal. Liquid consumption liberates consumers from having to engage in disposal as consumers can quickly circulate the access-based objects as also noted by Bardhi and Eckhardt, (2017).

Hence, this study builds on to the existing research on collections (Belk, 1991; Woodward and Greasley, 2017), and suggests that liquid consumption may be used by consumers as a way of maintaining coherent collection. Liquid consumption is suggested to help in maintaining clothes collection by increasing the potential for selectivity and building larger meaning, which are considered important aspects in collection (Belk, 1991). Consumers are able to maintain their own collection of clothes coherent, while getting variety to self-presentation through access-based consumption. Moreover, this study builds on to the current understanding of the access-based consumption as liberating from obligations of ownership (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012; Schaefer et al., 2016a) by illustrating the burdens of ownership related to clothing consumption.

### 5.2.2 Getting Attached to Access-based Goods

The findings of this study suggest that person-object relationships can become problematized in the context of liquid consumption when consumers get attached to items and experience desire to own. Building on to the findings of Kleine and Baker (2004) on attachment, this study finds that consumers may form attachment with accessed objects although they don't have personal history with the object and don't legally own them. This finding is rather novel in a sense that there is not much previous research discussing instances where attachment is present in the context of liquid consumption. Quite the opposite, Bardhi and Eckhardt (2012) found that consumers are not likely to form relationship with the accessed objects, and Belk (2007) suggests that consumers who tend to form attachment to objects, materialists, are not likely to even consume through sharing. In contrast to these arguments, Gruen (2017) found that in the context of car sharing some consumers may in fact get attached to objects which was found to be facilitated by familiarity through uniformity of products available and opportunities for personalization. The present research supports the finding of Gruen (2017) that attachment may be present in liquid consumption, and provides with novel understanding on this topic through studying it in rather different context where the objects available are highly differentiated and the value is ought to be predominantly symbolic.



The findings of this study show that attachment to objects consumed access-based is realized through difficulty of letting go, desire to maintain access, and desire to own. Although consumers experience difficulty of letting go, and desire to maintain access, desire to own is not as often experienced and even more rarely fulfilled. The desire to own is unexpected in the context of liquid consumption as it is contrary to the promises of it: liberation and flexibility. Moreover, building on to Belk et al. (2003) consumers seem to understand the nature of desire lasting only until the item is acquired as after that the desire transforms to boredom and routine. In order to control the desire, consumers employ strategies including: sticking to the plan, prolonging temporary ownership, and relying on opportunities for regaining access. Letting go is made easier, and desire to buy is restrained by relying on the fundamental motivation for access-based consumption: opportunity for variety while committing to less. This supports the finding of Lawson et al. (2016) as they argue that the opportunity for variety seeking may diminish the role of possessiveness. Moreover, although consumers restrain themselves from buying the item they may still try to prolong the access and rely on the future opportunities in getting to use the item again in case they attach to it.

The findings show that the source of attachment comes from the object becoming highly relevant to the self, but the desire to own may also rise from the object possessing high use value. The desire to own objects relevant to self is in line with previous research as it suggests objects relevant to self to belong to solid consumption (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017). However, the finding that desire to own may also raise from utilitarian use value adds to our understanding as use value is predominantly related to liquid consumption (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012; Gruen, 2017; Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017). The relationship with the object and the knowledge of it are accumulated through different practices such as wearing the garment in different occasions, feeling the material, and combining it with own clothes. Moreover, the study builds on findings of Belk (1988) regarding the centrality of control on ownership by showing that consumers understand letting go of control as a trade-off for access-based consumption and wish to gain control over useful items.

### **5.2.3 Dedicated Product Care**

Findings of this study show that person-object relationship is not solely straightforward as consumers engage in dedicated and careful maintenance of accessed objects. Informants of the study accounted taking better care of accessed objects compared to their own possessions. This is in contrast to what Bardhi and Eckhart (2012) found in the context of cars as in their study they saw that consumers were

misbehaving towards the accessed objects. Also Schaefer et al. (2016b) made similar findings that on misbehavior, which, however, decreased when the service provider was less anonym, when brand was stronger, and when there was community identification. Findings of this study could be explained by the findings of Schaefer et al. (2016b), as in this study the service was perceived as personal, the brands were perceived as strong, and some sense of community was shown. Findings may also be explained by the concept of positive reciprocity, which suggests that consumers who perceive having received good service become more involved and want to return the good (Vivek et al. 2012). The respondents reported finding items mostly in good-shape and feeling humiliated if having misbehaved an object, which made them take good care of the items. These findings are in line with the findings of Vivek et al. (2012) on positive reciprocity, and hence suggest that positive reciprocity may exist in the context of access-based consumption. In this sense, the findings of this study add to the current understanding of the consumer behavior towards accessed goods, and provide new perspectives on the usage and maintenance of accessed versus owned objects by suggesting the concept of positive reciprocity being present in access-based consumption.

However, one way of understanding the feeling responsibility of taking care of the accessed objects is to look it through the perspective of attachment. McCracken (1986) argues that consumption rituals such as possession rituals and grooming rituals enable the meaning embedded to the object to transfer to the consumer's life and to cultivate the meaning within the object. The informants reported that the level of special care they show towards the accessed objects is the same as they show towards their "*better category*" clothes and new products for the first times of use. Previous research has found that consumers are likely to take care of products they are attached to (Mugge et al., 2005). In this sense taking good care of accessed products could be due to attachment. However, similarly we could assume that taking better care is due to the newness of the products. Although accessed items may have been already used by someone else, items are always new for the consumers, especially so because consumers avoid loaning same items multiple times. This assumption is supported by findings of previous research that has shown that consumers tend to take better care before the newness wears off (e.g. Belk, 1988; Richins and Bloch, 1986). However, this remains to be analyzed further in future research.

### 5.3 Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to Consumer Culture Theory by expanding the understanding on the nature of ownership, attachment, and identity in the context of liquid consumption. This research develops understanding of the phenomena of liquid consumption by looking it in the highly symbolic context of clothing consumption.

This research confirmed several ideas presented in the emerging literature of liquid consumption to be existing in the context of access-based consumption of clothing. This study confirmed the argument Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017) presented about the coexisting nature of liquid and solid consumption. Furthermore, this research added to this notion by showing that in certain context liquid and solid consumption can coexist in a way that some objects are kept within solid consumption although consuming some objects access-based. This study also confirmed the notion of previous research of access-based consumption as liberating from burdens of ownership (Belk, 2007; Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012; Lawson et al., 2016) and further added on that by articulating the obligations in the context of clothing. Furthermore, sustainability, found to be important motivator for access-based consumption in previous research (Hamari et al., 2015), was also found to be central in this context.

This research also provided with certain findings that are in contrast with the existing understanding on the liquid consumption. This study contested the idea Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017) suggested of liquid consumption being merely based on the promise of use value and solid consumption being defined merely by symbolic value. This study shows that use value is indeed highly relevant in the context of solid consumption of clothes whereas symbolic value is present in the whole spectrum of consumption of clothes. Furthermore, this study provides with contrasting findings to previous research on consumer behavior towards the consumption objects in the context of access-based consumption. In some of the previous research the topic of the consumer behavior towards the objects has been found to be defined by negative reciprocity (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012) which has been argued to be minimized through certain elements (Schaefer et al., 2016b). However, the context of the study enabled to add to the understanding of this by assuming that the concept of positive reciprocity may exist in access-based consumption. However, this finding was left for further studies to confirm.

Moreover, this research also presented some findings that provide with novel understanding on the phenomena of liquid consumption. Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017) have pointed out the opportunity to

expand understanding on the phenomena by identifying contexts of liquid consumption where there is potential for identity or linking value. This research managed to indeed find such context and provide understanding on that topic. The research provided with novel understanding on identity construction in both liquid and solid consumption realms by suggesting that solid consumption may be merely based on constructing continuous identities whereas liquid consumption provides opportunities for variety in identity expression, identity experimentation, and constructing desirable identities. Hence, this research managed to bring the literature of construction-through-consumption to the discussion of liquid consumption. This study also added to the literature of wardrobes as clothes collection (Belk, 1991; Cwerner, 2001; Wooward and Greasley, 2017) by suggesting that liquid consumption may be a source for wardrobe management by helping in decluttering the possessions and build more long-term oriented wardrobe through shielding from the empire of fashion.

Finally, as there is rather limited amount of research made on the nature of attachment in the context of liquid consumption (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017), the findings of the study provide with rather novel understanding of attachment in the context of liquid consumption. This study finds that consumers may become attached to items consumed access-based, which expands our current understanding.

## **5.4 Managerial Implications**

This study provides useful knowledge for businesses regarding access-based consumption. The implications for businesses are divided in the following topics: offering, additional services, customer relations, and communication.

*Offering.* Firstly, this study provides some important practical information for compiling an offering of access-based service. This study clearly shows that consumers use access-based services merely for variety seeking and identity experimentation. Therefore, it seems to be important to provide a variety of styles in order to support consumers with their need for expressing their identities in their multifaceted natures. Moreover, providing consumers with outrageous, special items may help them with their quest for identity experimentation. These kind of items may help consumers to fulfill their need for challenging their current self-presentation and testing possible future selves. The offering should also be refreshed at times in order to maintain the allure for novelty, which was shown to be highly important for the consumers. However, as the threat in changing the offering too often is that

it diminishes customers' sense of security through continuity, another way of ensuring the sense of novelty is to have wide enough offering to provide with experiences of novelty.

*Additional services.* As shown in the findings, consumers do express attachment to objects, which may lead to desire to own. Hence, it seems to be fruitful to also provide consumers with an opportunity to purchase the items. Consumers also expressed fear of losing access to products they were attached to, and therefore it seems to be important to provide security for them by ensuring enough quantities of the same item. Ensuring sufficient quantities would help in diminishing consumers' fear of loss and help building trust for the use of service.

*Customer relations.* As the findings suggest, positive reciprocity may be experienced in the context where the service is highly personal, where communal aspects are highlighted, and where brands are perceived as prestigious. In these cases, consumers seem to feel the responsibility to take better care of the items. When access-based businesses want their offering to stay in good shape they should try to employ more personal elements to the customer relations and highlight communal aspects. Moreover, providing prestigious brands may help in keeping the maintenance level high.

*Communication.* As variety seems to be central to access-based consumption, it seems to be useful to highlight opportunities for variety in the communication. As one important motivation seems to be the perceived sustainability of access-based consumption as a consumption form, environmental friendliness should be highlighted in the communication as well. In addition, as access-based consumption seems to be preferred for it being a useful tool in decreasing possessions, this aspect should also be emphasized in the communication.

## **5.5 Limitations**

The present study is not without limitations. Being based on an interpretivist research paradigm the limitations of this research also lie within the weaknesses of that. The aim of the research was to gain understanding on the individual lived-experiences of the phenomena, and hence it doesn't even aim to generalize the findings to explain any single reality. However, the findings can still be seen as expanding our understanding on the phenomena in some level, and may be used to explain it.

The phenomenon was studied in the context of clothes which ties the findings of the study in this very specific consumption context. Clothes consumption is a highly symbolic and highly visible

consumption context (Van der Laan and Velthuis, 2016) which makes it quite particular context of study and ties the findings to it. However, the findings could be used to understand other similar symbolic consumption context to some extent.

Moreover, the demographic characteristics also set limitations for this research. As all of the participants of the study were women, the findings are limited to this gender. All the participants being in their 20s to 30s, leads to that the findings can be closely associated to this age group, and cannot be generalized to other age groups as such. Indeed, many of the participants referred their actions to be related to their process of maturation. Participants were all Finnish, mostly college educated young adults living in the urban area of the capital city. Hence, the study has its limitations on the national, cultural, and subcultural context.

Lastly, the findings of this study are closely tied to the specific context of the study, the clothing library in question. Although similar experiences are assumed to evolve among users of other access-based services, we still need to be mindful towards the influence of the specific characteristics of the service on the findings. As illustrated before, the service is based on environmental values, locality, communality, and personal customer relations. As all the participants of the study were customers of this same service, these features may have affected the accounted experiences, and hence the findings of this study to some extent.

Although the researcher tried to distance oneself from the study, the subjective nature of the research methods makes it impossible to stay fully objective. Hence, the subjective experiences and knowledge the researcher has may have influenced the findings at some extent. However, every attempt was made to avoid subjectivity to take too much space.

## **5.6 Directions for Future Research**

Although this study managed to shed light on the nature of ownership and role of identity in the context of access-based consumption, further research should be conducted in order to gain deeper understanding on the phenomena. The aspects that should receive further attention in future research are: the impacts on identity, the potential for symbolic value, and the nature of attachment towards access-based objects.

This research managed to touch slightly upon the issue of identity in the context of liquid consumption by assuming that access-based consumption is merely for identity expression and experimentation, whereas objects within the realm of solid consumption, clothes collection, still serve as important sources for construction of coherent identity. However, it would be beneficial to study this further in other contexts as well. Moreover, this study managed to grasp understanding that liquid consumption offers value for consumers through enabling them to access the signs and symbols embedded in the objects available and to use them in reaching for a specific identity. It would be beneficial to study this further in order to understand whether this is purely a context-specific finding or whether similar finding could be found in other contexts. This especially so, as there is not much previous research conducted regarding this.

In contrast to previous research, this study found that symbolic value is highly important in the context of liquid consumption as consumers use the opportunity to access objects to transfer imageries in their identity expression. It would be beneficial to study whether this symbolic value is important in other contexts as well, and if so, what is the symbolic value based on.

This research suggested that consumers may form attachment with the objects in the liquid consumption realm, and experience desire to own. As this finding is rather novel in a sense that it has not been discussed in previous research, it seems to be important to study this further. Special attention should be placed on the source and nature of attachment. Moreover, the source for dedicated product care is left for deeper analysis. In contrast to previous research, this study suggested the concept of positive reciprocity as existing in access-based consumption. However, the concept of attachment was discussed also as a potential source for the dedicated product care. Hence, future research could study this more, as there is not yet much understanding on this topic.

Lastly, limitations of the study suggest researching the topic in other contexts. Although clothing provided with a fascinating context to study the notions of identity and ownership in liquid consumption, it seems to be beneficial to study these topics in other consumption contexts defined by different levels of symbolic value and visibility. Moreover, the limitations related to the national, cultural, and subcultural context suggest carrying out a similar study in culturally and sub culturally different context as it might provide with novel perspectives on the phenomena.

## 6 CONCLUSION

Traditional ownership has predominantly been seen as central to consumption, and possessions have been seen important in consumers' identity work. Although liquid forms of consumption are emerging and even challenging the solid consumption, traditional ownership still sustains an important role in clothes consumption. Whereas liquid forms of consumption may enable consumers to create variety in identity expressions, experiment potential identities, and reach out for desired identities otherwise unreachable, consumers' own wardrobes filled with trustworthy items are still relevant sources for construction of coherent identities. Furthermore, liquid forms of consumption may help consumers constructing coherent collections in the realm of solid consumption, and yet at the same time escape quilt experienced due to unsustainable consumption behavior related to accumulation of unnecessary material. Although liquid forms of consumption may liberate consumers from burdens related to ownership, they are still not without their complexities. Access-based consumption may be problematized when consumers get attached to objects, and desire to own them.

The aim of the study was to gain understanding on how access-based consumption can be employed in consumers' identity work and what the nature of ownership is like in temporary consumption of clothes. This study adds to our current understanding on liquid consumption by showing that solid and liquid consumption do coexist in the context of access-based consumption of clothes, and serve different functions in consumers' identity work. The study finds differences between the liquid and solid consumption realms in ownership and attachment, and hence adds to our understanding on the nature of ownership in liquid consumption. Moreover, the study adds on to the existing research regarding collections by suggesting that access-based consumption may help in collection maintenance practices by enhancing selectivity, and building larger meaning to collections, as it enables getting variety without commitment on ownership.



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